Church and State
John 2, 13-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Now I wonder how many of you have been watching the BBC's production of Wolf Hall over the past several weeks? If you haven't then I would strongly commend it to you and it is still available on iPlayer. I read Hilary Mantel's wonderful books a few years ago and then had the great pleasure of going to see the Royal Shakespeare Company's production a year ago which I didn't think could be bettered. I have to say, I think the BBC production was, in a different way, just as good.

Now for those of you who have no idea what I'm talking about, let me enlighten you. Wolf Hall tells the story of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's master secretary and right hand man. Cromwell, played brilliantly in the BBC production by Mark Rylance, was a poor boy made good. He started as the son of a blacksmith from Putney and rose to become probably the most powerful man in England in the mid 1530's and a man whose reformations of England's laws and religion still impact us all today.

Cromwell spent his formative years in continental Europe initially as a mercenary soldier and latterly as a businessman. On his return to England he put his hard earned knowledge to good use as a lawyer and trader firstly making himself useful to Cardinal Wolseley and then to the king himself.

Cromwell himself developed a notorious reputation for his part in the downfall and execution of Thomas More and, of course, as Henry VIII's key agent in the dissolution of the monasteries – an activity which many would say he was ultimately responsible for having sown the idea in the mind of an impressionable king keen to raise revenues.

It was of course, a time of great religious upheaval. England was a catholic country answerable on spiritual matters to Rome but it was also the time of the protestant reformation in northern Europe. Martin Luther set off this powder keg on 31st October 1517 when he nailed his 95 Theses of religion to the door of the church in Wittenburg. Luther had grown increasingly disillusioned with the commercialisation of the church and, particularly with the concept of the sale of indulgences.

This practice had developed over hundreds of years and was based on the fundamental belief within the catholic church in the concept of purgatory. This half way house between heaven and hell was believed to be the destination of all souls after death. There they would suffer for their sins on earth – the more the sin, the longer the suffering, until such time as the soul was pure enough to get to heaven.

It was believed that prayer and good works whilst on earth could buy time off in purgatory and from this a complex series of indulgences developed. So a certain amount of prayer or a pilgrimage or the funding of church activities would all have a value in terms of time off in purgatory attached to them. Once the value was established it could, of course, be traded – an early version of CO2 trading if you like.

If you had money, you could then get someone else to do the hard work of prayer for you – likely a monk in a monastery or a priest in a church and thus buy your indulgences over the counter. All of this was anathema for Martin Luther who developed the fundamental protestant belief in justification by faith and not by works and the straw that broke the camel's back for him was the Papal Bull issued in 1516 to raise money to build St Peter's in Rome. Emissaries were despatched throughout Europe selling a host of indulgences and that was finally too much for Luther.

His new 'protestant' beliefs were developed over the next few years by Calvin, Erasmus and others and spread throughout Northern Europe until by the 1530's Germany and the Low Countries were firmly in the protestant camp lined up against catholic southern Europe.

Cromwell had strong protestant sympathies and when he was presented by Henry with the thorny issue of getting his first marriage to Catherine of Aragon dissolved, an opportunity presented itself for serious reform of the church in England. The first stage of this was to create the Church of England, a catholic church answerable not to the Pope but to the King. This meant that the decision on the end of Henry's marriage was then an English one and not one for the pope.

He then went on to enact a series of Acts of Parliament to wrest more and more control away from the church. This was partly driven by an avowed belief that the church was a corrupt institution and partly by the knowledge that it was also a very wealthy institution – hence the inevitable decision to dissolve the monasteries and move their lands and riches into Royal hands.

So when we listen to today's gospel from John and the story of Jesus losing his temper in the Temple and throwing out the moneylenders and traders we realise that this clash of church and commerce, of the religious and secular has been around since the very start of the life of the church. 1500 years later, things hadn't improved much and even now, we continue to debate the juxtaposition of church and state.

A week or so ago, in preparing us for the coming General Election, the Bishops of the Church of England wrote an open letter calling for a 'fresh moral vision of the kind of country that we want to be'. This has led to a furious debate – not on the issues raised by the Bishops, but on their right to express and opinion.

"Bishops should stick to religion" claimed some, they have no business getting involved in politics and secular matters. Really? In my book asking politicians to describe a moral vision is all about religion but what

do I know. When Jesus was kicking over the tables of the money lenders no-one was saying "Just stick to the parables – this is business" No-one was saying it because Jesus was shouting that the desecration of the temple was very much a religious matter just as asking our politicians to describe the morality of their policies is a religious matter.

Let's just examine what the Bishop's actually said – something most of the tabloid press seem to have failed to do. Given that the letter runs to 52 pages, this is very much a summary of the salient points! At the heart of the letter are 6 key values which the Bishops feel should be at the forefront of every Christian's mind when questioning politicians in the run up to the election and they are:-

1. Halting and reversing the accumulation of power and wealth in fewer and fewer hands, whether those of the state, corporations or individuals.
2. Involving people at a deeper level in the decisions that affect them most.
3. Recognising the distinctive communities, whether defined by geography, religion or culture, which make up the nation and enabling all to thrive and participate together.
4. Treating the electorate as people with roots, commitments and traditions and addressing us all in terms of the common good and not just as self-interested consumers.
5. Demonstrating that the weak, the dependent, the sick, the aged and the vulnerable are persons of equal value to everybody else.
6. Offering the electorate a grown-up debate about Britain's place in the world order and the possibilities and obligations that entails.

They also offer some insights into some of the key issues on the public agenda right now.

On health, the letter raises the issue of loneliness in society and states: If the care of severely disabled people, the terminally ill or people with dementia was shared in the context of a supportive network of friends, neighbours and allies, the fear of being a burden on others would not lead so many to undervalue their own life, even to the point of seeking to end it.

On education they say that the purpose of education is not simply to prepare people to be economic units but to nurture their ability to flourish as themselves and to seek the flourishing of others.

On Britain's global role they note that without a grasp of the power and meaning of religion, it is impossible to understand the dynamics of global politics today.

On the threat from extremism they say that the answer to 'furious religion' (that is, the religious impulse turned in on itself or used to justify oppression and conflict) is not to marginalise religion in general or see religious faith as some kind of problem. It is to acknowledge that religious

commitment is extraordinarily widespread and that people of faith within all the historic traditions have much to offer to a vision of a good society and a peaceful world.

Now I don't know about you but that all seems pretty sensible to me and wouldn't it be good to see the same degree of clarity and common sense in a few of the party election leaflets that will inevitably start fluttering through our letterboxes in the next few weeks.

So don't tell me that religion shouldn't be involved in politics or in the 'real world'. Religion is the real world. When Jesus lost his temper in the temple he did so because he saw commercialism going against the teachings of God. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to that church door in Wittenburg he did so because he saw commercialism going against the teachings of God.

So when we see the world going against the teachings of God should we keep quiet or should we also speak out? We won't have the option to tick a box that says God on May 7th but we will have opportunities between now and then to hold a mirror of faith to our politicians and challenge them. So ignore the tabloid press claiming we have no right to bring religion into politics – we have every right. It might even make the next 2 months more fun!

Tom Crotty