

THE NARTHEX

*The believers were first called
Christians at Antioch*
ACTS. 9:26
June - July
2010

The Orthodox Church of St. Dunstan Poole-Bournemouth

The Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of The United Kingdom and Ireland
Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East

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POLITICS

The recent General Election has set me thinking and researching our politics in this country. I have always been interested in politics but this has intensified lately. This long interest has meant, quite naturally, that my views have changed and developed over time. It would be very strange, perhaps even suspicious, if this were not so. Change is, of course, the evidence of life itself. We may all, I am sure, allow ourselves the conceit that, over time, our views mature and we may look back ruefully at what we once believed. Just as our spiritual life matures, from when we were 'babes in Christ', so our political ideas can develop similarly.

It has become axiomatic that the clergy in general should never tell people in a liberal democracy how they should vote. It is in fact forbidden for Orthodox clergy even to be members of political parties, though we may, of course, exercise our right to vote secretly in a ballot, like any other subject of the UK. So it has become the norm for parish priests to encourage their congregations to vote, often however, drawing attention to the moral issues that might be prominent, currently, in the nation's life. The aim, presumably, being that the Christian voice should be heard in the political domain.

In commenting therefore on the recent events surrounding the election of Her Majesty's latest government, I shall, of course, observe these accepted protocols and heighten instead, the spiritual dimension of these recent events.

What is evident in Britain's political life, perhaps as far back as

The Great Reform Act of 1832, is that the nation divides along two sides: those who strive to change the state of affairs and those to strive to preserve the status quo. Individuals may indeed take contrary positions on particular issues: a reformer on this issue; a conservative (small 'c') on that one. But there is an even more fundamental difference in attitude to be observed and here, the religious mind comes into play. It might come as a surprise to some but put simply, there are those who hold that our vocation on earth is to struggle as officiously as we can, towards the perfect society. This has been the general trend within western Christianity ever since the Great Schism of 1054 onward. It is also the position of what, in politics, is called *The Left*, (ever since the radicals sat on the left hand side in the National Assembly in 1791, following the French Revolution). In Western Christendom this appears, first, as the disastrous imposition of clerical celibacy - the idea that priests (as well as Bishops) should be unmarried. This has a long and complex history but it met, as might be imagined, long-term resistance on behalf of both clergy and people. Many Catholic clergy lived with their 'wives' right up to the Reformation. This insistence on celibacy by the Catholic authorities was, in part, founded on a vision of a society led by a neutered and educated elite, the *spirituales*, leading ordinary men and women, the *Carnales*. The line of this kind of thinking can be

readily traced, only, since the Reformation, the Church has been replaced by the nation state (or, gradually in Europe, by the EU). This idea of creating an ideal society, led by elites, has gripped the minds of both religious and secular people alike; it was one of the founding motivations behind the establishment of the USA.

On the other hand, there is another religious mind, one firmly grounded in its relationship with the Divine. This approach presumes that Man in his fallen nature, although fundamentally good in his creation, is nevertheless, ultimately incapable to achieving his own perfection without the grace of God. The very idea that, should we make a perfect society then perfect people are sure to result is patently absurd. Perfection cannot come from imperfect ingredients and it begs the very question as to what is perfect. But if we start with our relationship to God, who is perfect by definition, then we deal with the matter from the other way round. Instead of asking how is a perfect society made in order to make perfect people, we ask, how are we perfected in order to see a perfect society? This latter idea is recorded in the very last book of the Bible, the Apocalypse, in the vision of the new Jerusalem (Apoc.21:1ff), the point being that the heavenly city, the kingdom of God comprises of people who have been redeemed and brought to perfection not just

by their own striving and effort but through the grace and love of God. The same hubris that attempted to build the tower of Babel (Gen.11:1-9) empowered the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century and has been a potent force in the political thinking of most British political parties since World War II. The fact that - as Enoch Powel MP once remarked, all political careers end in failure, notwithstanding - this is still a feature of contemporary politics and shows how tenacious the ideas of *The Left* remain.

What has this to do with Orthodox Christianity? The answer is, everything, in as much as our vision of human destiny is inextricably bound to the message of the gospel. And here, the second strand of political thinking comes in. Instead of striving to create the perfect society - a project which is bound to end, like all political careers in failure - there is an acceptance of the way things are, the status quo; not the *idealism* of The Left but the *realism* of the right. [please note: the right is not Fascism. Fascism is of the left. Hitler's Nazi party was after all The National *Socialist* Party! Similarly, the BNP in Britain are a thoroughly socialist party.] To the Orthodox Christian mind it is this realism regarding what human beings actually are, that clears the scene of all false dreams of perfection on earth. There is no Jerusalem to be built *in England's green and pleasant land*; there is no *bonfire of the vanities* that will purge the world of all the corrupt; there will be no *war to end all war*; no final great equalization of all people on the face of the earth. For the truth is, that human perfection is, finally, the gift of God and that will come in God's time, not through the ingenious systems, schemes and ideologies of Man.

None of this implies that our politics should not aim at justice for everyone, for God is

just; nor that we should not selflessly help the poor and distressed, for the poor are always with us; nor that we should not work for peace, for the peacemakers will be blessed in their work. Only, we must not imagine that our work will ever be done for in this world, Man is fallen and there will always be injustice and always poverty and always conflict but even in our politics we can present an icon of the Kingdom of God, not a state built by our efforts but a mystery to be fulfilled at the consummation of history when God has ordained.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) the famous Whig politician of the Georgian era, drew attention to the damage done by the French Revolution (1789). He looked askance across the English channel seeing with horror, every tradition swept away in the pursuit of political liberty, equality and fraternity and the cult of Reason. And he thought that somehow something alien was being forced upon what it is to be human. Though it might be argued that the Enlightenment of the 18th century brought many blessings, Burke instead saw the whole project as a threat to what fits naturally upon us as human beings. He wrote in response:

'We fear God, we look up with awe to kings; with affection to parliaments; with duty to magistrates; with reverence to priests; and with respect to nobility. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is natural to be so affected.'

There are people, claiming the name Christian, who believe, quite honestly, that their divine vocation is to change the world and involve

themselves in worthy projects to bring this about. We beg to differ and as we watch and pray and quietly and secretly fast and give alms, we shall look for the new heaven and the new earth that comes down from God, suddenly, without warning, at the end of all.

I hope you did vote in the last election and I trust you voted wisely and with realism as your guide.

Fr. Chrysostom

SERVICES

JUNE

The Apostles' Fast

Sun 6th 2nd after Pentecost All Saints of Britain The Divine Liturgy 11.30am

Sun 13th 3rd after Pentecost All Saints of Antioch The Divine Liturgy 11.30am

Sun 20th 4th after Pentecost The Divine Liturgy 11.30am

Thurs 24th Nativity of St. John the Baptist

Sun 27th 5th after Pentecost The Divine Liturgy 11.30am

Tues 29th Ss Peter and Paul App

JULY

Sun 4th 6th after Pentecost The Divine Liturgy 11.00am **NB NEW TIME**

Sun 11th 6th after Pentecost The Divine Liturgy 11.00am

Sun 18th 8th after Pentecost The Divine Liturgy 11.00am

Sun 25th 9th after Pentecost The Divine Liturgy 11.00am