

## 286 The Lord and Democracy – 2

Among its undoubted strengths, notably clarity and simplicity, we saw in last week's Reflection that democracy is far from ideal when it comes to a nation determining the paths it is going to follow. A straight majority of votes on any issue sets the direction for the road ahead, whether or not that direction is right or wrong, good or bad, or true or false, in the eyes of Almighty God.

We have seen this in the recent referendum concerning abortion in the Irish Republic, the result of which ("bringing the abortion laws into the 21<sup>st</sup> century" as the victory-cry goes) has led to intense pressure on Northern Ireland to "modernise its repressive abortion laws". Here is loud, constant, blatant wrongness of word and deed concerning this crucial issue, with the God-fearing upholders of Northern Ireland's tightly-controlled abortion laws being venomously shrieked at. All this is being done under the quasi-sacred banner of "human rights" and in the name of democracy.

Thankfully within the Bible the Lord God has given us vital principles of governance which, under His guidance and by His gift of "common grace", can be humbly applied today for the well-being of all. From the beginning with Adam and Eve, authority lay with the senior males of the patriarchal families, with decisions being taken hopefully in accord with what they knew of God and His expectations of them, through the oral records passed down since Adam. Via such men as Abel, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob we come to Moses, directly appointed by God to lead His covenant people in a "theocracy" (Exodus 3 & 4).

So far therefore we see no sign of democracy: Moses was often caught between the murmurings of the people (if put to a vote they would surely have gone back to Egypt! eg Exodus 16.2-3, 17.3) and the sovereign will of Almighty God. At Jethro's suggestion (Exodus 18.13-26) Moses did appoint many judges to assist him in leadership (18.25), these men presumably being recommended by the tribal leaders rather than by "one man, one vote" democracy. So at that stage the leaders were God-fearing, or at least were expected to be, and they and the people knew who God was, and what were their privileges and responsibilities under Him within the laws of the covenant and the worship requirements of the tabernacle. Individuals may have grumbled, but given godly, obedient leaders the system worked as it should.

There followed the years of the judges and then of the kings (1599 – 606 BC), a continuous mishmash of good and bad, of victory and defeat, of truth and falsehood. Throughout these thousand years three very simple, constant, central principles shine forth. The first is that "the Boss" is always Almighty God, no matter what any "I'll-do-it-my-way" judge, priest, soldier, king or, these days, politician, may assume. As we find in our Concordances, the Old Testament is brim-full of statements such as "I am the Lord and there is no other ... they shall know that I am the Lord" (eg., Isaiah 45.23 / Zechariah 12.10 / Philipians 2.5-11 / Revelation 1.7).

The second principle is equally simple: obedience to Almighty God by leaders and peoples is duly blessed by Almighty God, just as He has promised (eg., Numbers

23.19 / James 1.17); and equally, disobedience is first exposed with many gracious divine warnings, and these, if unheeded, are followed by divine judgement.

The third principle is a specific, very visible test-case of this second principle of obedience, namely the attitude of Gentile nations to God's covenant people the Jews, who are still, in spite of their stiff-necks, the apple of His eye (eg., Deuteronomy 32.10 / Psalm 17.8 / Lamentations 2.18 / Zechariah 2.8 / Romans 11, especially vv 25-32 // Genesis 12.3 / Galatians 3.8 / Matthew 25.31-46).

These divine principles of governance largely end with the exile of Israel and Judah following their persistent disobedience. Though the exile was followed by a return to the land as promised, this was under foreign powers, Rome being in charge when the Messiah was given.

For today we recognise that these God-given principles of national governance stand clear and tall, which presents political leaders in a democratic system with a paradox: to gain and retain political power they depend on a democratic majority, which ultimately means pleasing the people; but to do what is right they are to rule in ways that are pleasing to Almighty God, even if that means displeasing the people whose votes put them into power. Next week God willing we consider how political leaders can best handle this paradox, upholding a right relationship between Church and State as they do so.

In these tense days we do well to "pray without ceasing" for our leaders (I Thessalonians 5.17), including praying those fine old words from the Prayer Book that, under our Queen, we may indeed "be godly and quietly governed".

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