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## POLITICS, PREACHING AND PRAYER

It must have happened in an unusually mild winter in, say, 1978 or 1979.

I was leading a Christmas Eve Service in my little campus congregation at Syracuse University. In those days I led the Intercessions as Presider at each Eucharist. (I know better now: It should have been the Assisting Minister who led the prayers, but hey, to live is to learn, eh?) In any case, it was also my custom, in those days, to ask for prayer requests informally in my little gathering of worshippers, and then to pray the Intercessions *ex corde*, based on the people's requests. When I asked "What shall I pray about tonight?", little nine-year-old Kristina spoke up.

She said, "I'd like you to pray for snow for Christmas Eve. I want you to pray for a white Christmas."

I said, "Well, Kristina, I'll pray that prayer; I'll ask for a white Christmas. But remember, there are a lot of people who have problems when it snows: old people who are afraid they'll fall on the ice or in snow drifts, and the road crews who have to shovel that snow and try to keep the streets clear for driving. So I'll pray for them too, OK?"

She nodded, amid some indulgent adult snickering. And that's how I prayed that Christmas Eve. I said something like this, at the proper moment: "Dear God, some of us love snow, and want to see a white Christmas. But others of us are scared or burdened when it snows and would just as soon keep the snow away. So we'll let you sort it out. We'll leave the problem in your hands..." There were a few more indulgent adult snickers.

I tell this story as illustration of the kind of problem that sooner or later faces everyone charged with crafting or praying the public prayers of Christians at worship. How do you deal, in prayer or in preaching, with differences of opinion within any Christian assembly that aspires to call itself "catholic"? See [Essay 29](#) above.

And it's not simply a matter of differences of opinion among us about the weather. How about differences of opinion among us about political issues? Is it appropriate, for example, to embrace a specific political position in prayer? To pray as partisan for a specific political cause or concern or candidate?

And how about our preaching? Is it legitimate to "preach politics" from the pulpit?

My own answer is No to the first, and Yes to the second. With qualifications.

Let's take preaching first. My own experience as parish pastor has been that it's useless to try to hide your personal politics when you enter the pulpit. You simply can't do it. And those preachers who try however mightily to disguise their own political preferences in preaching are doomed to fail. "Not to decide is to decide", says the poster from the 1960's, implying — correctly, in my view — that if you say nothing, you're simply subscribing to the *status quo*. By your silence you're endorsing the Present Principalities and Powers.

So: Does political bias belong in the pulpit? Answer: You can't keep it out. Is there a place for prophetic political proclamation in preaching? Absolutely. ALL preaching is political. All preaching addresses the present political situation, either intentionally in your word, or by default, in your silence.

Further: It will only take a few weeks or months in a new parish before your people will begin labelling you, like it or not. Sooner or later — probably sooner — your people will identify you as left-wing or right-wing, as liberal or conservative. With or without your permission. You simply can't hide who you are. It's a lost cause, in your personality or in your preaching, to try to dissemble, to try to maintain an Olympian objectivity about anything political. You will be found out. Your people will unmask you. With or without your say-so.

HOWEVER, an important qualification: I'm not suggesting here that every sermon should become a kind of spiritual lobby for a specific political viewpoint, or a partisan political assault on "the opposition", however that is defined. Much less am I suggesting that preachers endorse a specific candidate in a sermon, or urge their people to go out and vote a particular party line. That would be an abuse of the pulpit, in my view. And it could lose your parish its tax-exempt status!

But I am suggesting that you as preacher have a right, a responsibility, to tell your people how the Spirit speaks to you, in general terms if not specific. You have the authority, the duty, to remind your people how the Spirit has spoken to the Church, and through the Church, on this or that issue. You have the right to remind your parish that they have called you to be their *rabbi*, their teacher, on this and on many other questions of consequence, and when you preach on political issues, you're simply doing what belongs to their call to you. And you might point out that the Church provides for other occasions, other contexts than worship — such as adult education

opportunities — for laypeople to express how the Spirit addresses them, on this or that issue.

So you might choose your words very carefully, in preaching, and allow that Christians have a right to disagree on most moral and political questions. Very few issues have the character of *status confessionis*. Very few moral issues have a life-or-death urgency — affecting, that is, an eternal either/or. Of very few political questions can it be said that you're either with us or against us, you're either Christian or you're not Christian, you're either inside the line or outside it, depending on your vote on this one.

Here's one example of politics in preaching. Suppose you regard the current war in Iraq as a moral and military misadventure, as I do. In your preaching you might first try to make clear that Christians can have divergent views on this subject, and still call themselves Christian. But your own opinion, formed by scripture and tradition and reason and experience ([Essay 70](#)), has led you to question this American enterprise in Iraq, for the following reasons. And you spell them out, with appeals to the prophets of Israel and their warnings about nationalist pride, and Jesus' words about peace-making. You won't want to impugn the motives or intentions of Bush or of any of the war's leaders: You'll try to assess only their judgments and actions. And you'll conclude by noting once again that it's legitimate to disagree, and that you'll still regard dissenters from your own view as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. To make your case you'll perhaps have to depart from the Sunday's lectionary readings, but that's legitimate too, I'd argue.

The example above strikes me as eminently even-handed, fair and reasoned. You're simply making your testimony, your Spirit-directed witness, in a difficult and divisive cultural context that cries out for comment by the Church's teachers and *rabbis*. Your judgments in each case are critical of observable actions and consequences, not of presumed patriotism or piety.

Now, how about politics and prayer? That's a different matter, as I see it. Christian public prayer has its own rules, its own constraints. Most importantly, the Intercessions, the Prayers of the People, are supposed to be public prayer. They are to reflect the concerns of the *publicus* — of everyone. EVERYONE present must be able to add an "Amen." And if it is to be truly catholic prayer, even everyone NOT present: See [Essay 74](#) above. The entire liturgy is to be a public event. Everyone should be invited to add an "Amen!"

So Christian public prayer must be scrupulously non-partisan, non-party-line. Prayer in this manner will still be counter-cultural. Our primary allegiance as Christians will never be to any specific family or clan or creed or race or nation (or sexual orientation!) Our allegiance will be only to "the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ", to quote Handel's *Messiah*. Those who prepare and lead Christian public prayer will be certain to pray in

such a way as to include the whole people of God. Political left and political right, socially liberal and socially conservative, black and white, rich and poor, old and young, male and female, gay and straight: That's the whole human family. That's the Christian church. And each should be able to add an "Amen".

Here's an example: Faithful readers of these pages will recall ([Essay 67](#)) that I regard U.S. President George W. Bush, and most of his foreign policy advisers, as war criminals. Quite apart from whatever the depth of their personal pieties, that is, I nevertheless feel they're guilty, perhaps unknowingly, of heinous crimes against humanity. But I'm also aware that other faithful Christians have an alternative perception. So in my public prayers I must guard my prejudices carefully. (Even in my preaching I would not put my bias as strongly as that.) In conversation, yes, I'd call Bush a war criminal. But not in a sermon. And definitely not in my public prayers as leader of corporate worship. Instead, I'd phrase my public prayer something like this: "Stretch out your hand, O God, against all who work violence against others, and restrain them. And hasten the Day of your *Shalom*, when justice shall roll down like water, and there shall be war no more..."

Is that chickening out? I don't think so. I know who *I* mean when I pray that God's justice be stretched out against the violent. But in my careful wording, whether it's composed or *ex corde*, I'm allowing others to fill in the names of those *they* might be thinking of. It's a matter of making my public praying a little more generic, a little less specific, than I might make in my private personal praying. In my private personal prayers, sure, I'm free to pour out my heart in lament and anguish and even outrage. But my public prayer in the whole assembly of the faithful must be more circumspect. The proving principle in public prayer: Can everyone, even political opponents, say "Amen"?

Oh yes. On that Christmas Eve long ago in Syracuse, I had no sooner finished my prayer than the heavens opened up and it snowed. And snowed. And snowed. Twenty inches had fallen before morning! It was one of the heaviest single snowfalls in the city's history. Hah! With that, a Blessed Christmas to you and yours!

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