

Reve 21 / John 17

Last week we read from the letter of revelation about a new era being ushered in. A good reading for the week of a general election. And sure enough, the language of ushering in a new era has been used, even yesterday afternoon. The Liberal Democrat leader encouraged protestors to continue campaigning across Britain, for political reform – and to push for proportional representation.

Proportional Representation – as favoured by the Liberal Democrat Party – seems to many people like a much fairer system of election than the one we currently have. At the moment, the nation is divided into areas, constituencies, where different candidates are elected, but where the winner takes it all. In the end, the party who actually govern the country may not reflect the actual votes that people make. The fate of the nation is determined by a few thousand swing voters in tight constituencies. Voting for your favourite party can seem pointless.

But with a hung election, the Liberal Democrat party – the third greatest party in British politics, are likely to team up either with the labour or conservative party. No party on its own got enough votes to govern the country. A deal will have to be struck. An alliance between one of the bigger two parties, and the Lib Dems. And it looks as though the key issues will be over the reform of our political system. At the end of last week, a group of pressure groups and non government organisations got together and formed a coalition, Take Back Parliament, in the hope to push through these reforms, now there seems a chance.

It's not the first time such reforms have been promised. They were promised in 1997, and we waited thirteen years for them to come about! The lesson learned – if you're interested in voting, if you take seriously what it means to vote – then it means a little more than ticking a box every four years in a general election. The logic of those who argue that we must vote in a general election, that voting is a moral obligation, that logic also drives the same people to work now with this coalition to reform British Politics – which you can do by joining the group called “take back parliament”.

So yesterday afternoon, we hear about the new era being ushered in! The new heavens and the new earth. This is not the first time people have longed for political change... Twenty first century Britain is not the first time and place where those with power have abused it! And of course, it is not the first time when people have complained.

Two thousand years ago the Roman Empire governed ruthlessly. Its power was expressed by two different means, which the author of revelation calls the Beast and the Whore. The Beast – the great military power of the empire, the force which no one could withstand. Enemies would be kept at bay, citizens battered into submission. The Beast. And the whore, enticing people to adopt all that Rome stood for. Seduction into favouring the empire – into tolerating its injustices for the goods that it brings US. “I won't vote for this party, because it will affect me negatively...” I'll lose my tax credits – I'll have to pay more to travel – my income tax will increase – my child won't get into the school I want her to have...

Sure, reform British Politics – but there is no point reforming British politics without reforming British people. Politics will always be built around the things that we treasure. And if our country, for instance, were full of self-interested people who vote only to favour themselves, will we – in the end – have a better politics no matter what reforms we have?

The reading from revelation spoke of a new city, the new Jerusalem. A place where justice, finally, is a reality. There is no more night. A place governed by the throne of God, and of the lamb.

Its worth dwelling a little on the symbolism of the lamb. We all know, the lamb is used for sacrifice. It is a passive figure. Nothing pro-active about a lamb. It's the opposite of the symbolism of a lion. The lion, strong, beautiful, powerful, deadly, a predator. It's lions that belong on thrones. The throne of a lamb is a ridiculous image. A lamb is not even a sheep. It can barely control its own legs and stand up on its own. It is the opposite of a lion. Weak, helpless, pathetic, powerless, - it is prey. What kind of image is that?

The temptation throughout Christian history, has been to say that you cannot change the world, you cannot make a difference in the real world unless you first gain power – unless you first get into a position of Power. And once you have power – you can affect the world for good! The lion is the appealing metaphor ... You hear it all the time.

You hear it in our churches today – where evangelicals with no commitment whatsoever to Church of England beliefs, nevertheless go off to train as Anglican vicars because the Anglican church is the “biggest boat to fish from”. Power first – then we can change the world. You hear it in Baptist Churches – where we become preoccupied with the latest methodology to guarantee success, the greatest system based on the insights from the most powerful churches: Willow Creek, Saddleback, Holy Trinity Brompton – We must run Alpha Courses, become a Purpose Driven Church, a relevant church. We do these things to ensure power, effectiveness, change ... all of them, all of them, fit precisely into the driving metaphor of the Lion.

I hear it with people all the time. Friends of mine who say the church needs to find Christian celebrities to sell its cause... use Christian advertising to exert its influence ... evangelicals looking for the next big Christian name now that John Stott is getting very old. Power, effectiveness, Lions.

And let's be clear. How many times have Christians used the same justification as everyone else... They only want power because... We want power to change the world for good. So we can be trusted with power. Or, how often have we heard, “I only came into politics to reform it...” If I had power, I would use it for good – not like everyone else in history. And we forget the Lord of the Rings. The ring of power, which turns any who would wield its power into a servant of evil. And where the hero of the story is not the warrior, or the wizard, or anyone with power – but the pathetic little figure of a hobbit, and not any half-sized being, but Sam Gamgee, the gardener of another hobbit.

How tempted we are to become lions. We worship at the throne of the lamb. The one we worship is Pathetic, in the truest meaning of the word. Passive. And still we have not learned the lesson of the Gospels. That this Jesus, nailed to a cross, did not call down the power of heaven to smite his enemies. He hung there, naked, humiliated, tortured, sacrificed.

And yet it is precisely this Jesus, this figure, this lamb – who is vindicated by God. And because God chose the weak things of this world to shame the strong – real power lies here... with the lamb. It is this Lamb who is vindicated at the resurrection. It is this lamb who truly embodies so much more power than the lion. It is the lamb who, having relinquished all power, becomes an unobstructed means to god's power in the world.

The reading from John's Gospel speaks of the reform of people that forms the basis of any real politics. This is how the glory of God is made manifest in the world. Not through great and mighty deeds. Not through the effectiveness and exertions of the lion. But through a bunch of people who are learning how to love one another.

Love one another, so that they may be one. Well, I suppose it's a sentiment that makes up no end of story lines and Hollywood films and songs. "The power of love." But even that, even the notion of the power of love can be turned into yet another corrupt form of power. When we talk of a bunch of people loving one another – we tend to think of a nice, middle class, nuclear family, but much bigger. Where we all get on nicely, and smile with each other, and make each other cups of tea.

But really. Isn't it true that the most annoying things on this planet, are other people! It's easy to love other people if you exclude the ones you don't like. The awkward ones, the ones whose problems we can't solve, the ones who make us uncomfortable, the ones who annoy us. Let's get rid of those people, until my community is surrounded by people just like me, people I can get on with, people I can enjoy, people I can love. And hey presto, through all the language of community and loving one another, what we end up with is a community created in our own image. We are lions!

For a group of human beings to live with one another in genuine love, is nothing short of impossible. We have characters, and differences, and habits ... all of which means that if we are going to be one, as Jesus is one with the father, then we have to learn the meaning of sacrifice – and as such, the driving metaphor becomes that of the sacrificial lamb.

At Xchange this week, Jordan took us on a tour through Scripture and what it says about the state. The nation state. And the conclusion to which he steered us was that, time and again, there will always be states, there will always be those in authority over us. And the call of Scripture is never to fix them when they are broken. It is rather to offer an alternative... a genuine alternative. And that is by embodying, (and embodying itself is deeply related to the word politics), because we embody a way of being out of which a new politics can grow.

By loving one another, we are not remaining aloof from politics, or above it, or ignorant of it. By learning to love one another, by making this the priority, Jesus is praying for a body of people to resemble that of the lamb. And the irony is that it is precisely then, that we reflect the glory the lion could never manage. When we love one another, the politics, the power, the lion that emerges, emerges almost accidentally.

But whatever glory, whatever consequence, whatever world-changing effects that community has – is accidental, in God's hands, and more powerful than we can imagine, because it arises from those who have, in God's name, like Jesus himself, relinquished their power in order to love. And that is how, according to Scripture, the lion shall lie with the lamb.