

## Trinity VII Sermon Prep – Amos 7:7-15; Romans 13:1-7; Mark 6:14-29.

Romans 13. What a text.

When I was an earnest young Northern Ireland evangelical, Romans 13 was one of the texts that really did keep me awake worrying at night. That's what earnest young Northern Ireland evangelicals do: we lie awake, and worry about the Bible.

Because the Bible is the Word of God, and if the Bible is clear on something - well then that settles it. That's what you have to believe.

And Romans 13 is very clear: obey the State. There is no authority except from God; those who resist authority are resisting God, and they will incur judgement. The State does not bear the sword in vain! Resist, and you deserve all you get. Thus saith the Lord.

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Henry by and large got the Church he wanted. For most of its post-Reformation history, the Church of England has been very much on the side of the Crown, Government, Establishment, and Law and Order. About 100 years ago the socialist, pacifist, feminist Christian Maud Royden was uncomfortably near the mark when she described us as simply 'the Tory Party at Prayer.' She was speaking in the context, of course, of the First World War, and our behaviour during that war is well worth thinking about, as an example of how things can go terribly wrong. As we approach the centenary of the War's end, and as all those emotions of patriotism and pride and admiration for the soldiers gather force – we need to remember quite how spectacularly badly the Church of England failed. With a very few honourable exceptions, we gave into the war fever which demonised our German brothers and sisters, and we justified all kinds of horror against them. Indeed, we not only gave into it, but we drummed it up, we were the war's chief cheerleaders. Who needs a popular press when you have vicars saying this kind of thing: 'Not only is this a holy war, it is

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And that, my friends, is where too much Romans 13 gets you.

Which is why it is extremely important to remember that Romans 13 is not the only, or most important thing, the Bible has to say about the State, and how God's people relate to it. In fact, if *all* you read was Romans 13, you'd have a crazily wrong view of things. After all, its author Paul himself ended up being executed as a criminal, by the State. And that happened, in part, because he insisted on telling that State – or more precisely, the Roman Emperor Nero – that he served a different King, King Jesus, who would one day hold all earthly kings, even great Nero himself, to account for the blood they shed. And Jesus himself, of course, had been executed by the Romans, ever ready to meet any threat with lethal force. We cannot remember often enough that Government, Law and Order, and Establishment killed Jesus. After that, any notion that the State is always good, always right, always to be obeyed should seem very strange to Christians.

In fact, we can go a little further than that. If you read the whole sweep of the Bible - If you remember what happened to Amos, or the murder of John the Baptist, or Paul dying before Nero, and above all the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, then the following thought really should occur. **If your Christianity never involves any fundamental tension with the values of the State, or of the culture all around you – if your Christianity is never a little controversial and difficult and maybe even dangerous – that is probably a really bad sign.** It is, I suppose, just about possible that your State and society has become so like God's kingdom that there's hardly any room for conflict left – but that is wildly optimistic. Much more likely is that, just like Henry VIII wanted, we've confused being good Christians and good citizens. We think they're the same thing. But sometimes – lots of the time, the Bible suggests – being a good Christian means stepping seriously out of line. Confronting powerful people, confronting what most of the country thinks, causing and getting into a whole lot of trouble.

So what exactly do I mean? Where should the battle lines be for us in Britain in 2018? Well, we will all have different views, and as a church – locally and nationally – we will only figure it out by talking together. You might well disagree with what I think are the battle lines, and that's fine. We should talk about it. But, for my money, what the Christian always needs to do is look and see who's getting crucified – because that's where Jesus is. So who is getting victimised, tortured, bayoneted? Whose life is getting written off as disposable, not worth

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That could mean some -maybe most? – of the nearly 190,000 unborn children who are expected to be aborted in the UK this year. 190,000. Or those foreign prisoners whom we now know, despite years of denial at the very highest levels of Government, that our intelligence services helped to torture. Or those patients in Gosport Hospital, and maybe elsewhere, whose lives were ended sometimes, it seems, just because some doctors and nurses thought them 'difficult'. It will be this sort of thing. Not Labour or Tory or Liberal, not even Leave and Remain – but: who's getting crucified? And what can we do to stop it? That's what God cares about.

This is just basic Christianity: as basic as prayer, as basic as coming to church, as basic as being a good person. This is what God, right throughout the Bible, demands. This is why he calls people, this is why he has a church – to take part in this great battle for human dignity, to stop the crucifixions. If we don't do it, all of this is a waste. The prophet Amos heard God say so very clearly, and he said this: 'I hate, I despise your church services. Take away from me the noise of your anthems; I will not listen to the melody of your organs. Let justice flow down like rivers, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' (Amos 5:21-24, altered). Let justice flow down like rivers, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. So what are we going to do about it?

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And that, my friends, is where too much Romans 13 gets you.

Which is why it is extremely important to remember that Romans 13 is not the only, or most important thing, the Bible has to say about the State, and how God's people relate to it. In fact, if *all* you read was Romans 13, you'd have a crazily wrong view of things. After all, its author Paul himself ended up being executed as a criminal, by the State. And that happened, in part, because he insisted on telling that State – or more precisely, the Roman Emperor Nero – that he served a different King, King Jesus, who would one day hold all earthly kings, even great Nero himself, to account for the blood they shed. And Jesus himself, of course, had been executed by the Romans, ever ready to meet any threat with lethal force. We cannot remember often enough that Government, Law and Order, and Establishment killed Jesus. After that, any notion that the State is always good, always right, always to be obeyed should seem very strange to Christians.

In fact, we can go a little further than that. If you read the whole sweep of the Bible - If you remember what happened to Amos, or the murder of John the Baptist, or Paul dying before Nero, and above all the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, then the following thought really should occur. **If your Christianity never involves any fundamental tension with the values of the State, or of the culture all around you – if your Christianity is never a little controversial and difficult and maybe even dangerous – that is probably a really bad sign.** It is, I suppose, just about possible that your State and society has become so like God's kingdom that there's hardly any room for conflict left – but that is wildly optimistic. Much more likely is that, just like Henry VIII wanted, we've confused being good Christians and good citizens. We think they're the same thing. But sometimes – lots of the time, the Bible suggests – being a good Christian means stepping seriously out of line. Confronting powerful people, confronting what most of the country thinks, causing and getting into a whole lot of trouble.

So what exactly do I mean? Where should the battle lines be for us in Britain in 2018? Well, we will all have different views, and as a church – locally and nationally – we will only figure it out by talking together. You might well disagree with what I think are the battle lines, and that's fine. We should talk about it. But, for my money, what the Christian always needs to do is look and see who's getting crucified – because that's where Jesus is. So who is getting victimised, tortured, bayoneted? Whose life is getting written off as disposable, not worth

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Basil Bourchier, cited in Wilkinson *Church of England and the First World War*, p.254

it? And then what the Christian needs to do is shout about those people very loudly, and support them in every way possible.

That could mean some -maybe most? – of the nearly 190,000 unborn children who are expected to be aborted in the UK this year. 190,000. Or those foreign prisoners whom we now know, despite years of denial at the very highest levels of Government, that our intelligence services helped to torture. Or those patients in Gosport Hospital, and maybe elsewhere, whose lives were ended sometimes, it seems, just because some doctors and nurses thought them 'difficult'. It will be this sort of thing. Not Labour or Tory or Liberal, not even Leave and Remain – but: who's getting crucified? And what can we do to stop it? That's what God cares about.

This is just basic Christianity: as basic as prayer, as basic as coming to church, as basic as being a good person. This is what God, right throughout the Bible, demands. This is why he calls people, this is why he has a church – to take part in this great battle for human dignity, to stop the crucifixions. If we don't do it, all of this is a waste. The prophet Amos heard God say so very clearly, and he said this: 'I hate, I despise your church services. Take away from me the noise of your anthems; I will not listen to the melody of your organs. Let justice flow down like rivers, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' (Amos 5:21-24, altered). Let justice flow down like rivers, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. So what are we going to do about it?

**Peter Waddell**