

**Easter 4: 11th May 2014 – Souls to the Polls  
St Saviour's and St Barnabas 9.30am+11am**

**This Wednesday, on 14<sup>th</sup> May, the church commemorates St Matthias. It is a special day for me because it marks the anniversary of my ordination as a priest. But it is special to me for another reason. Some of you may have gathered that I am not one of those Christians who believes that Christianity and politics do not mix. I am with Desmond Tutu when he says, “when people tell me Christianity and politics do not mix, I ask them what Bible they are reading”. And it always strikes me as significant that as, in this country, normally have elections towards the end of May – this year the elections on 24<sup>th</sup> May to the European parliament and London borough councils, that we remember on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May the story of St Matthias.**

**For I think I'm right in saying that the account in Acts Chapter 1 of how Matthias came to be an apostle, the one who took Judas' place amongst the twelve and then shared with them in all the activities mentioned in our first reading today, that that account is the only occasion in the Bible which tells of an election taking place. It was quite simple:**

there were two candidates, Barsabbas and Matthias, the remaining 11 apostles drew lots and Matthias was duly elected.

This is not to say, however, that it is the only reference to “election” in the Bible. For the other sense of election, the sense in which a group or individual is chosen by God, elected, is a sense that runs throughout the Old and New Testaments. The Israelites were chosen, elected, by God to be a special people, to perform a special role in salvation history. When the majority of the Israelites are unfaithful, God then chooses, elects, a faithful remnant. In the New Testament there is lot about Jesus being the chosen or elected one and in turn about Jesus sending out the disciples as those chosen, elected, to preach and baptize.

Both these very different senses of election referred to in the Bible, the disciple’s election of one candidate over another and the election by God of a group or individual to fulfil his purposes, have, I believe, something to say to us as we approach election here in the UK in 12 days time and as we think of various elections taking place throughout the world. Both kinds of election represent what we might call two

**strategies for Christian engagement in political life, including but not only including, casting our vote.**

**The first is a strategy of getting stuck in and getting on with making choices, indicating preferences - however limited, unsatisfactory and tedious the range of options may be. No politician or political party will stand up to all the ideals a Christian might like to see represented in political life. Nor will any one person or political programme ever solve all the problems of the world. But this does not excuse the Christian from making particular choices for or commitments to those individuals or programmes which they think can make some difference. Apathy or indifference is not an option for the Christian. Just like the first disciples, we can rarely expect God to directly intervene and make our decisions for us. There are times when, just as with the election of Matthias, we are required to make our own preferences, make what we think are the best choices, even though we may well discover them to be the ones we might regret in the course of time.**

**And yet we make such choices aware of a second strategy, the other sense of election, aware that whatever choices and**

**decisions we make, ultimately it is God, even with the imperfect choices we make, the mistakes we make, who will bring about that which he desires. Despite all that the Israelites did to reject God, God did use them to bring about his plan of salvation; despite the disciples misunderstanding Jesus, despite that small scared group fleeing at his arrest, denying him, giving up hope, despite some, as we heard earlier, still doubting even as they saw him ascend into heaven, we know in this Eastertide that it was this group who God did indeed use to begin his work of making his love known to all peoples. So there is a proper strategy, and no less in politics, of allowing God to do what he will do with human beings in this moment of our history, aware that this may well be in spite of all our expectations and preferences, all our mistakes - in spite, indeed, of the people we elect to govern us.**

**I hope you will have realized by now that neither of these strategies will necessarily guide you towards voting for one particular party rather than another. Even though we must each make a choice, we each do so aware that the world will ultimately only be saved by God in the manner of his choosing. We are caught between time and eternity, between**

**living with the imperfections of the present and the promise of the perfect redemption of the world that is to come; caught between making the choices we can amidst the complexities of this world as it is and upholding the ideals which will only be fully realized in the world to come. Between what we choose, desire, elect for ourselves and God's choice, desire and election for us.**

**So, with all that I've said taken for granted, let me tentatively suggest three key ideals that might inform the decisions we have to make in this imperfect present as we approach the general election. Someone once said, as it happens, in C19th Russia, "the doctrine of the trinity is our social programme" and although I'm not presenting that particular programme now, each of the three ideals I shall present to you takes its cue from an aspect of the God we worship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit: first, the ideal of human life; second, the ideal of human love and third, the ideal of human community. These are all areas of concern where it seems to me that the contrasts between Christian ideals and secular worldly values are at their sharpest, areas that require prayer not only before we enter the ballot box but**

**that will require prayer and action even and perhaps especially after the result of the election is known.**

**First then, the ideal of human life, an ideal of which we're most aware when we worship God as Father. Human life from a Christian perspective is to be viewed as a gift from God, something to be treasured, to be enjoyed for what it is. Each human being is created by God, by a loving Father who wants to enjoy a relationship with each of his children. Everyone is "special", made in the image of God to reflect his glory. This, of course, is not always how secular thinking views the world. Increasingly, secular science is exploring the means by which human beings can be altered before life, so we can give birth to the babies of our choosing, exploring the means by which those who will drain our energy and economic resources can be appropriately disposed of.**

**The Christian ideal of human life calls into judgement any policy, whether indiscriminate abortion, human genetic modification, or euthanasia which seeks to devalue human life, to see it as anything less than a gift. And more so, the ideal of human life puts particular demands on our politicians to ensure that the needs of those who might be**

**dismissed as peripheral to the running of society - whether young, elderly, disabled, migrant, sexual minorities, the mentally ill or whoever - that their needs and the needs of those who care for them are taken seriously and that they are enabled to play a full part in our society, so that others may receive from them the gifts that our heavenly father has given them to share.**

**Secondly, I suggest that we keep in mind the ideal of human love, of which we're most aware when we worship God as Son in the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus' love knew no bounds. In the gospels that love is shared with all, but the gospels make us particular aware of Jesus' love for those excluded from society, and not least those excluded from society through poverty. Our gospel reading today gives us that amazing image of the gate, the one who provides the path towards abundant life. What a contrast this is with the love most highly prized by so many in today's secular world, namely the love of money, a love that doesn't stop to count the cost for those who go without, not only in this country but in so many parts of our world.**

**This ideal of human love, a love that particularly stretches out to those in economic need, brings great judgement on so many of the ways in which our world is run: the provision of sub-standard services in our economically deprived communities, the payment of low wages, the organisation of the benefit system, the collection of debt from developing countries, the unfettered growth of multi-nationals, the arms trade. The ideal of human love places demands on our politicians to consider the needs of the poor, the distribution of resources, the opportunities for work and study, the amount we spend on defence, the way we interact with other nations, particular the poorest nations of our world.**

**And finally, I suggest that we keep in mind the ideal of human community, of which we're most aware when we worship God as Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured into the hearts of the early church, both Jew and non-Jew and they found themselves speaking in many different languages. Worshipping God as Spirit reminds us that he intends us to celebrate human community in all its diversity, that the community to which we belong as Christians is a world-wide community of many nations and languages. What a contrast this is with some**



**attempts to narrowly define the community to which we belong so that we can easily fear and exclude others.**

**The ideal of human community brings judgement upon attempts to define community narrowly and demands that our politicians recognize the value of human diversity, indeed that we celebrate it as a gift from God. It demands that we find ways of celebrating multi-cultural Britain, that we listen properly to the claims of those, wherever they're from, who have been persecuted or who've suffered from the loss of liberty, or the inability to live decently through war or famine. It demands that we regard the earth's resources as intended for the whole of humanity. It calls into question our policies on immigration and enlivens our concern for the environment.**

**I've presented three ideals based on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity which I believe bring judgement upon many of the values of our increasingly secular society and place particular demands on our politicians as they seek to live up to these ideals as best they can in our all too imperfect world. It is for us in 12 days to take our souls to the polls and choose who those politicians will be, but it is also for us**

**as Christians to work as best we can both before and after the election to influence people of all parties, with ideals inspired by our understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

**Steven Saxby, May 2014.**