

## Reflections on Being Christian in an Election Season

The Rev. Timothy Safford, July 24, 2016

My fellow Americans, you may have noticed that there is a national election going on. The prayer, *For an Election*, found on page 822 of *The Book of Common Prayer*, grounds us in a good theology for elections:

*Almighty God, to whom we must account for all our powers and privileges: Guide the people of the United States in the election of officials and representatives; that, by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

If those sentiments are correct, both our behavior and choices in an election are part of our account with God. So, we need to take our work in this election seriously. Voting is a religious act.

A religious act, and a religious privilege. In January, 1994, I travelled through South Africa as that nation prepared for its first free election where every citizen, not just whites, had the right to vote.

On one Sunday, I had been asked by a priest I knew to preach at his church on a Sunday he was away. An all black congregation, it's home was a corrugated tin, rusting church in a desperately poor township.

I could only preach in English, but the congregation spoke Xhosa mostly. The translator had not appeared, so there wasn't reason to proceed. The congregation kept singing hymns, trying to be polite to the white American who didn't have a clue.

At a pause, an older woman—whom everyone I would learn called “Auntie”—stood and said in English, “Father, tell us how to vote.” Then she translated her request to the group, and the room fell silent and eyes bored into me.

Was this a test? I wondered. Did they want me to encourage them to vote for Nelson Mandela in the election forthcoming, the first election in which they would be permitted to cast a ballot, or did they think I was there to represent the party of F.W. De Klerk and the white ruling minority? I started to make some innocuous, complimentary comments about the candidates. Then Auntie yelled out, “Don't tell us who to vote for! Just tell us how to vote. How is it done?”

I realized that not only had these good Christians never seen clean water in their township, or anti-malarial medicine in their clinics, or electricity in their home or real schools for their kids, they had never seen a polling place, voting booth or ballot.

Auntie took my hand and pulled me to the rusty corrugated tin wall, where one poster had been taped over another poster. The poster on top was voting instructions, a copy of the ballot, instructions on identification needed at the polls, and so on, but only in English and Dutch. “There are no instructions in our language, and I can't read the English,” Auntie said. “Can you make sense of this? How are we supposed to vote?”

I did my best, the congregation near rapture at the sheer joy of the idea of voting. “Is it true,” Auntie asked, “that in America you vote many times in one year?” “Yes,” I answered.

“What is it like to vote?” she asked.

“I don't think about it much. There are so many elections that sometimes we even forget to vote.”

The look of shock on her face still pains me. Then she said, with utmost conviction, “I have waited my entire life to vote. After I make this vote, then God can call me home.”

Not knowing what to say, I turned back to the election poster, lifting it to see what was on the poster beneath. There was Jesus, in a classic Sunday school drawing sent with the Bibles from a foreign missionary society. He had chestnut hair, a trimmed beard, clean clothes and deep blue eyes. The poster depicted Jesus emerging from the tomb on Easter morning, resurrected, conquering death with life, vanquishing hate with love, and subjecting evil to the good.

“This Jesus,” Auntie chuckled, “Who is he? So we put the voting poster on him. Voting is Jesus to us.”

It was the only sermon preached that morning. Auntie taught me that I can't tell you who to vote for, but I can tell you that you have to vote. To do so is sacred. It's resurrection practice.

The values of God, the causes of Jesus, are eternal while the candidates come and go. We all fail before God and the challenge of the kingdom. But we as Christians must remain relentless to our commitment to God's values even as the political machinations turn them into sound bites. Our concerns are poverty, peace, persecution, hardship, healing, freedom, inclusion, love, acceptance, food, and water, just as surely as they are

the issues of temporal concern like terrorism, public safety, immigration, the economy, taxes, trade and the environment.

Last Sunday, the Church calendar had us remember Bishop William White, the visionary who believed that the Episcopal Church, like the emerging nation in 1783, must rise from the consent of the people, who would show their consent through voting. Thereby, bishops would be chosen by ballot, and so it is today. Last we, joyously, we welcomed our new bishop, Daniel Gutierrez, whom we elected, by ballot.”

The church calendar this week asks us to remember four women who dedicated their lives to abolition and for women to have the right to vote: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Ross Tubman. Their biographies are printed in the leaflet. I urged the Standing Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Church to include Philadelphia’s own Lucretia Mott in the commemoration, but thus far, not.

The scriptures today are about persistence, specifically the persistence needed to bring about God’s providence and justice. Only through persistence, both scripture and history teach, does God’s justice come about. The abolition of slavery and the right of women to vote, came through decades, really centuries, of prophetic persistence. “Power concedes nothing without a demand,” said Frederick Douglass, who worked with and was inspired by the women we remember.

Being Christian is demanding justice persistently against the power of evil.

Through baptism, a Christian is called to a life of persistent struggle to bring the Kingdom of God, and God’s justice, into this life, so that God’s will is on earth, as it is in heaven. Until hungry child is fed, every naked refugee is clothed, every sick grandmother cared for, and every sword beaten into a plow, we know that God’s will has not been accomplished, and the work of persistent baptismal living is still before us. The prophet Isaiah said that you will know this day has come when the lion lays down with the lamb, and the lamb is able to sleep!

We, of course, are still a long way off; we imagine the promised land, and strive for it, even if we may never get there ourselves. Still, every mile we advance is worthy of a celebration. The greatest tool is the vote, and let us never forsake it.

But let us always remember this prayer:

*Guide the people of the United States in the election of officials and representatives; that, by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*