

September 22, 2013

Recent events in Quebec have prompted much discussion about the place of religion outside of the close confines of worship spaces. This is not a new phenomenon as testified in both our passages today.

Psalm 79: 8-9

This passage dates from the time of the Babylonian destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE. It is a lament of the community pleading with God to redress the atrocities brought against them by their enemies. Underlying this lament is the assumption that God's interests and Israel's political interests converge. In other words, the sacred and the secular meet. Listen to this psalm.

⁸Don't blame us for the sins of our parents.
Hurry up and help us; we're at the end of our rope.
⁹You're famous for helping; God, give *us* a break.
Your reputation is on the line.
Pull us out of this mess, forgive us our sins—
do what you're famous for doing!

1 Timothy 2: 1-7

Members of the early Christian church struggled to distance themselves from the cult of emperor worship that flourished in the Roman Empire in the 1st century. The author of the letter to Timothy offers a way for Christians to live in a secular world. He does not see a life of faith and citizenship as incompatible. On the contrary, the Christians are to pray for their civic leaders because all people have a stake in the well-being of the community. This is further evidence that religion can and should engage in the culture. Hear these wise words of scripture.

¹The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. ²Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business of living simply, in humble contemplation. ³This is the way our Savior God wants us to live.

⁴He wants not only us but *everyone* saved, you know, everyone to get to know the truth *we've* learned: ⁵that there's one God and only one, and one Priest-Mediator between God and us—Jesus, ⁶who offered himself in exchange for everyone held captive by sin, to set them all free. Eventually the news is going to get out. ⁷This and this only has been my appointed work: getting this news to those who have never heard of God, and explaining how it works by simple faith and plain truth.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – “In the absence of a magic wand, use your head”

I remember being told many times that people with good manners and social graces should never mention 2 subjects in conversation: politics and religion

Imagine my surprise upon reading our scriptures for today where it is abundantly clear that religion and politics are perfect subjects for consideration... TOGETHER!

Timely to in the wake of the announcements on September 10th of Quebec’s proposed Charter of Natives.

Let’s start with a look at Psalm 79.

The setting is the destruction of Jerusalem – oppressive control of Israelites by Babylonians.

The situation is dire => psalmist calls on God to fix this nasty political mess.

This lament poses the notion that if God doesn’t intervene in this political crisis, God’s reputation will be put in jeopardy.

Doug Bratt from Calvin Seminary argues that the people of Israel are demanding God’s forgiveness in the form of deliverance which is, by its very nature, a political outcome.

Expresses the conviction that where there is oppression God will make things right.

Writer of 1 Tim crosses the social taboo of mixing religion and politics too.

He calls for tolerance, peacefulness, good citizenship, prayer for rulers.

What these scriptures suggest, that seems so radical and potentially distasteful to critics, is that our faith is not simply a private endeavor but, rather, and necessarily, a public one.

John Buchanon, long time editor of the Christian Century wrote in the Sept. 18/13 issue about his experience as a newly ordained minister in 1963.

Speaking about Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech.

It was, in fact, a sermon. It convinced me that Christian faith led to involvement in the world, not retreat from it, that the security, welfare and equal opportunity of all people were priorities for the God revealed in the Bible – and therefore priorities for the church. That argument was not universally applauded not by a long shot. Many people accused King and those who supported him of politicizing Christianity, inappropriately mixing religion and politics and endangering the financial security of the church.

Another article in this same issue "Evangelical body supports politicking in the pulpit" (John Dart) reports on more religious groups in US fighting the IRS's efforts to revoke tax exempt status from churches that endorse candidates or promote particular political positions – many of which are social justice issues.

If you think this is an isolated American issue, you need to be aware that CRA is continually revising their rules around the tax exemption status of churches and clergy => the argument is that religion is private and politics is public.

This brings us to Quebec's proposed Charter of Values.

Premier Pauline Marois argued that the charter upholds Quebec's "obligation to remain independent of religious authority" CBC News online 10/09/13 => Quebec would declare itself a secular society/culture.

Charter would ban public sector employees including teachers, day care workers, hospital and university staff from wearing "ostentations" religious symbols on the job BUT it does not clearly define "ostentations."

Curiously it would not remove religious symbols considered "emblematic of Quebec's cultural heritage." => read Roman Catholic

In an article in the National Post Online 11/09/13 – Graeme Hamilton writes of his interview with Lucien Bouchard's brother, historian Gerard Bouchard.

He cites Quebec's chronic insecurity of being a French minority in North America which the PQ are using to create the perception that Quebec is being overwhelmed by immigrants – he declares this to be totally false. "It is based on nothing."

I don't want to get too focused on the situation in Quebec that we lose sight of the bigger issue, from today's scripture, is faith private or public?

Does your faith turn you inward?

Or does your faith direct your gaze outward? As it did to the writer of Psalm 79 or 1 Tim?

I found an interesting report that could probably be translated, on some level, to the work of this church and countless other churches.

Rock Church of San Diego is intensely involved in the community under the leadership of Miles McPherson, a former NFL player, drug addict and alcoholic, who experienced a dramatic conversion. In one year alone, the total number of hours Rock Church members contributed to civic volunteer work exceeded 600,000. McPherson estimated that the church's in-kind contributions to the city topped \$10 million (a fact not lost on

the political leadership of San Diego). G. Mitrovich, "Unnoticed Ministries", Christian Century 18/09/13.

Should our faith be public or private?

This is a question as old as Psalm 79 and as timeless as our response to poverty in West Broadway, use of chemical weapons in Syria, P.Q. Charter of Values.

May Christ's Spirit guide you to understanding, courage and peace.