



ENGAGE NOTES

Notes and questions from the talks for further engagement by individuals or groups.

allsaintsworcester

Introduction

What was Jesus' pattern for handling power? How are we to approach our enemies? Can violence ever be legitimate? How are we, as citizens of a heavenly kingdom, to relate to modern nation states and national identities? How are we called to engage and to make a difference? Some interesting questions here in this module, which is entitled 'political imagination' with the intention that our imaginations can be awoken in creative and hopeful ways, beyond what normally comes to mind when we think of 'politics'.

POLITICAL IMAGINATION (1): power

Introduction

Share the films that make you cry. Why do these particular stories affect you?

or

Bring to mind someone who is powerful. What makes them a powerful person?

Recap

Power is complex and unavoidable. There are many different sources of power (e.g. position, knowledge, money, physical strength, relational network, personality, etc.). When you think about it, we all have power, and we are all navigating significant imbalances of power all the time, within families, at work, and within church life.

The big question is how are we, as followers of Jesus, going to hold our power?

Read

Exodus 4:28-5:9

How would you sum up the differences between Moses and Pharaoh in terms of how they are holding their power and what they are doing with it?

On one side there is the big ego of Pharaoh, setting himself as some sort of divine figure, dominating and exploiting others. On the other side there is Moses' dignifying service of others, recognising the image of God in them. On the one side there is a blasphemy, violence and suffering. On the other is a reverence, peace and mutual flourishing.

Following Nietzsche, a popular take is that the deepest truth of our existence is that it is all really a struggle for power, for mastery and domination of others. That this self-serving 'will to power' is the bedrock of our reality, and all that other stuff, like morality, like love, is just decorative topsoil that we use to cover over the hard reality of our ultimate desire for power.

Discuss

What evidence do you see in support of Nietzsche's bleak opinion of things? There is a lot! What evidence do you find compelling that disagrees with Nietzsche?

The gospel insists that the true bedrock of reality is the love and peace and communion of God. That sin, death, violent competition is the imposition on top of that.

Read

Philippians 2:6-11

In this hymn the earliest Christians celebrated how Jesus has exposed our will-to-power and attempts to dominate others as definitively *not* the way that lines up with the deepest truth about the universe. He provides our pattern for how to handle power. It's not about lording

it over others or trying to 'get ahead', it is about using our power to empower others that we may all flourish in love.

Discuss

Share good and bad experiences of people handling their power.

Why do films and stories of love, self-sacrifice and suffering in solidarity have the power to move our hearts and make us cry in a way that empires of domination never could?

Where are you powerful? How might your power be used to serve others?

Further reading

"In Search of the Common Good" – Jake Meador

POLITICAL IMAGINATION (2): vocation

Recap

In this second talk Rich unpacked a biblical approach to thinking about vocation. He suggested that followers of Jesus have a *three-part* vocation:

1. Our shared vocation as humans to bear the image of God
2. Our shared vocation as Christians to restore the image of God
3. Our specific, personal vocation to partner with God in His mission to renew all things

John Mark Comer

"We're image bearers, created to rule, to partner with God in pushing and pulling the creation project forward, to work it, to draw out the earth's potential and unleash it for human flourishing — to cooperate with God in building a civilization where his people can thrive in his presence. And in this cosmic agenda, each of us has a vocation, a calling from God, a way that God wired us, somebody to be and something to do — because the two merge in perfect symmetry."

The first two parts of our vocation are shared with others and expressed in a particular way in and through each of us. In addition, each of us are called to partner with God in His mission to renew all things in a specific and unique way. This is the way in which we give particular expression in our lives to the vocation we all share.

Often we can find ourselves as Christians trying to discern what our calling is. And it's important to do that. If we begin with the first and second part of our shared vocation, we will find that process easier.

Our personal vocation is contingent on various factors, including:

- our story – including our family of origin
- our journey of faith – including the prophetic voice of God in our life
- our personality type – which informs how we approach people and work
- our spiritual gifting – all a work of grace and the Spirit
- our opportunities – both historic and present

Read

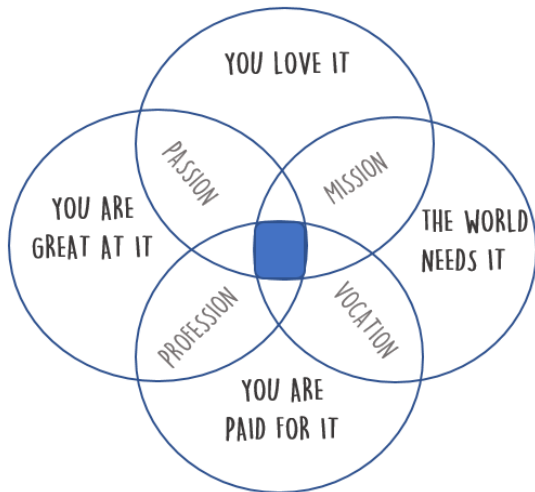
2 Corinthians 5:11-21 and 1 Peter 2:5-9

Discuss

- How do these two passages help us make sense of our two shared vocations (to bear and to restore the image of God)?
 - How can we do this in the midst of real life?
 - What would the outworking of this vocational life look in every sector and sphere of society if each follower of Jesus truly lived them out where God has placed them to have influence?
 - Are there other passages of scripture that help us understand our vocation?
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- How have you gone about discerning God's specific calling for you?
 - Where have you received clear guidance from God, perhaps through prophecy, that has influenced what you have done with your life and how you have done it?
 - And where have you had to exercise faith and wisdom, making choices in the absence of a "clear assignment" from God?

Take it further

Take some time to reflect on this diagram along with the list of factors above that influence our particular vocation.



How would you articulate your particular sense of vocation through the lens of this diagram?

What could you change/better prioritise in order to align your personal passion and vocation?

What are the limitations on all of this that you experience (we all do)? How is this frustrating?

Recommended reading

"Strong and Weak" – Andy Crouch.

POLITICAL IMAGINATION (3): violence and martyrdom

Recap

When Jesus sits down on the mountainside to teach his disciples (Matthew 5), he is inviting them (and us) into a whole new way of seeing. It's a wider perspective, it's the bigger, longer vision of the coming kingdom, in which patience, humility and gentleness are celebrated, rather than might, victory, and force. It is only within this wider perspective that Jesus' words make any sense:

"Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth..."

This wider perspective opens up possibilities for brave courses of action that would not otherwise make sense, such as martyrdom:

Esau McCaulley

“The hope of new creation is often portrayed as an opiate lulling us into complacency... [But] the coming kingdom remains a central pillar of theology that not only gives us hope for the future, but also negates the power of those who can kill the body but do not more.”

Read

Matthew 5.38-41

Turn the other cheek? Is this a doormat spirituality, that would allow all sorts of bullies to walk all over us without consequence? Well, no. In a culture in which handing over your outer cloak to someone who was demanding your shirt would have left you rather under-dressed, it would have created quite the awkward scene, to the shame of the bully. And under Roman occupation, where a Roman soldier had the right to demand any peasant carry his heavy pack for 1 mile but no more, to keep on walking for a second mile was a subversive move - the soldier could get into trouble for this. So, turning the other cheek, like each of these creative responses to violence and oppression, is a move of inner strength, reclaiming that image of God dignity and also inviting the other to recognise that dignity.

Discuss:

- How do you understand v39 “Do not resist evil”?
- When/where are you tempted to meet aggression or malice with more of the same?
- What might a more creative response look like for you? What could happen?
- ‘Violence saves the day’ is a story about the way the world works that is constantly dripped into our imaginations. Where have you absorbed this message recently?
- What affect might this have on your instincts?
- What questions would you have for a Christian pacifist?
- What questions would you have for a Christian who supports war in limited circumstances?
- What did you find most challenging or thought provoking about the Sunday teaching?

Pray

Lord Jesus, you are our King. Thank you for the citizenship and belonging that you give. Renew our imaginations. Give us wisdom and vision. And give us courage to follow the way of the cross in all our little ways. Inspire us to interrupt our cycles of violence and bear witness to your coming kingdom of peace. Amen.

POLITICAL IMAGINATION (4): loving our enemies

Recap

Continuing on from where we left off last week (Matthew 5: 43-48), we hear what are some of the most difficult commandments of Jesus- "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you." Could Jesus really be asking us to do this? Is it even possible?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"Loving one's enemies is not only an unbearable offence to the natural person. It demands more than the strength a natural person can muster"

Read

Matthew 5.43- 48

To be able to love our enemies is not something we can do alone and neither are we called to. We need the Spirit of God to give us supernatural strength to do so. We begin by praying for the other person/ situation and asking God for the ability to be able to forgive and (if at all possible) to move toward the other person¹. When we pray, God works on our hearts and with that heart-change, we play our part in subverting the world's way of operating which encompasses relationship breakdown, pain and destruction at all levels (between individuals and neighbours, businesses, countries etc).

Discuss:

- Do you think that loving one's enemies is the most difficult thing Jesus calls us to do as His followers? Why/ why not?
- Are Jesus' Instructions to love our enemies an "Impractical Ideal" or a "practical reality"?
- What constitutes an enemy for us today?
- Everywhere we look we see a lack of forgiveness/ broken relationships. How can we as Christians, in our spheres of Influence (workplace, schools, friendship groups etc), model a different way of living?
- How has it felt for you to be able to forgive someone for something? Was it hard to love them afterwards?
- Desmond Tutu (Archbishop of Cape Town, anti- apartheid activist) said- **"Without forgiveness there can be no future for a relationship between individuals or within and between nations. Forgiveness is not nebulous, impractical or idealistic. It's thoroughly realistic. It's real political in the long run."**
- What is your hope and prayer for the future of our world as we engage with this topic of reconciliation and forgiveness?

Pray

- If you feel comfortable to, break down into 2's/ 3's and share something which this has brought up for you (as much as you are willing to share), pray for one another to

¹ Moving towards the person who has hurt us may be impossible for a number of reasons - if reconciliation isn't possible, this does not mean that the forgiveness you offer towards them is any less valid in God's eyes. Refer to the talk if in doubt as to what is meant by this

receive the empowering Spirit of God afresh, to give us strength where we have none and to be able to pray for the offending person.

- “Lord Jesus, you came to us when we were your enemies. We turned away from you, mocked you and belittled you and yet you still forgave us, drew us close, restored us to relationship with the Father. Help us to forgive others as you forgive us. May your kingdom come in our midst. Amen.”

Read

Dietrich Bonhoeffer- *The Cost of Discipleship*