

10 September 2017

I have become accustomed to reading some very strange proclamations from the more extreme religious leaders in the USA, especially in recent times, but I was uncharacteristically lost for words when I read that televangelist Jim Bakker had threatened Christians would start a civil war if President Donald Trump was impeached.¹

I found this difficult to take seriously. But then I remembered that 81% of white evangelical Christians in the USA had voted for Trump, a politician whose policies, in my humble opinion, stood against pretty much everything Jesus ever stood up for.

Other prominent figures of what is often called the ‘religious right’ have made equally outlandish claims. Trump’s spiritual advisor, televangelist Paula White has claimed that Trump was raised up by God, and that opposing him is opposing God.² Another televangelist, Rick Joyner, believes opposition to Trump’s agenda and nominees is Satanic.³ And conservative activist Mary Colbert says Trump is “the chosen one of God” and anyone who challenges him will be cursed by God. That curse, she said, will extend to their children and grandchildren.⁴

I want to bang my head against a brick wall whenever I hear stuff like this. It is one thing for people to say things that make themselves look silly. But it’s another thing to say things that make a whole lot of other people look bad. By declaring themselves to be the authentic

voice of Christianity, they are tarring all who profess to follow Jesus the Christ with the same brush.

This evening's Older Testament Lesson from the Book of Ezekiel includes a scathing attack against false prophets. Ezekiel is one of the more difficult books of the Bible to get your head around, with its bizarre visions and images, although the opening section of Chapter 13 is pretty straightforward: those who make proclamations from their imagination and follow their own spirit instead of making authentic prophecy are condemned.

But the question that must be asked is how do we know whether a prophecy truly comes from God?

Many would suggest using scripture as a benchmark, but the problem with that is that people can and do cherry-pick text from the Bible to suit their own agenda; out of context scripture has been misused in the past to defend slavery, apartheid, and judicial murder, and today it is misused by to exclude people from the life and work of the Church on the basis of how God created them, as well as to affirm politicians like Donald Trump.

I suggest we instead use Jesus and the Gospels as the benchmark, and ask that most clichéd of questions, 'What would Jesus do?' when we try discern what teachings we may hear comes from God, and what does not.

In the Gospel According to St Matthew, Chapter 7, verses 15 - 20, Jesus warns us:

¹⁵ 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will know them by their fruits.⁵

So that is the real acid test to determine whether one who claims to speak for God is an authentic prophet, or a false prophet (or a charlatan). St Paul gave us a useful comparison in his letter to the Galatians, in which he distinguished between the "the works of the flesh", which he listed as "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these"; and the "the fruit of the Spirit", which is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control".⁶

So, on that basis, I would respectfully suggest that if a religious leader endorses narcissism, greed, self-righteousness, and exclusiveness, we are probably hearing a message that comes from somewhere other than God.

As you will all know, we have a general election in 13 days. And unlike North America, we do not usually have preachers promoting particular politicians from the pulpit. Now I wouldn't dream of telling you how to vote on Saturday week; I can remember being horrified when my grandmother told how she was told in Church to vote

Labour in 1972, and then to vote National in 1975. We each have our God given reasoning and I am not going to tell you how to use yours.

But, having said that, while I was reflecting on my message for this evening, I was reminded of Jesus' first known public teaching in a synagogue.

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'⁷

Therefore, whenever we hear a policy that promotes good news to the poor, release for captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and liberty for those who are oppressed, we are hearing an echo of Jesus' earliest recorded public proclamation.

So when it comes to voting on Saturday week, all I would ask is that I ask you consider which party or parties will best serve the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.⁸

Darryl Ward

10 September 2017

<http://theword.tk>

¹ <https://www.redstate.com/joesquire/2017/08/29/jim-bakker-predicts-christians-will-start-civil-war-trump-impeached-video/>

² <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/trumps-spiritual-adviser-opposition-to-president-trump-is-opposition-to-god/>

³ <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/rick-joyner-opposition-to-president-trump-is-satanic/>

⁴ <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/mary-colbert-god-will-curse-trumps-opponents-and-their-children-and-grandchildren/>

⁵ Matthew 7:15-20 (NRSV)

⁶ Galatians 5:16-21 (NRSV)

⁷ Luke 4:16-21 (NRSV)

⁸ Matthew 5:3 (NRSV)