

So the General Election is upon us and voting has begun.

How many of you have voted yet?

I think voting is a pretty important part of being a citizen:

It expresses our sense of belonging,

our stake in the life we share together as a national community.

And it expresses our hope, our hopes, for the kind of life that we can share together.

And in all of this voting is actually a means by which we live out our faith.

Faith and politics are two things that some people believe should be kept apart.

But I don't see how that kind of separation can be possible

and, certainly, I don't think that it is desirable.

Because our goal as Christians is to live an undivided life.

Jesus was asked,

“what is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

And he replied,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength”

What he is saying is,

“Love the Lord your God with all of who you are”

Jesus is inviting us to understand that we cannot divide our lives into separate compartments of work and home and politics and sport and business and play and church as if those things are unrelated.

We might engage in those activities in different times and places and with different people but those activities are all part of one piece - our life,

a life that we are being called to live in love for God,

in commitment to God,

in devotion to God.

So as Christians I think we are being called to vote as an act of devotion to God,
an act of worship of God.

I wonder if you've thought of it in that way before -

that voting is an act of worship?

So, how does that work?

Well, I think worship is about placing ourselves in the path of God's desire for the world,
not as obstacles to that desire,
but so that we can be swept up in that desire and become more consciously part
of that desire,
part of, and partners in, God's activity in the world,
God's love for the world.

So voting is an act of love for God and for God's world.

I wonder if you've thought of it that way before -
that voting is an act of love.

Voting is an act of love for God and for one another because it is a way in which we commit
ourselves to recognising and responding to God's love for us and for the world.

So what does God's love look like and feel like?

Well, I think the story of the Exodus that we have been hearing over these past few weeks
invites us to understand that God's love for us is about freeing us from experiences of captivity
and oppression.

It is about liberating us from the things that hold us captive and it is about bringing us into a
more hope-filled future.

God brought the people of Israel out of slavery and oppression in Egypt,
brought them out to a place of freedom where they could begin to understand
themselves once more as people with a place and an identity and an awareness that
they were loved.

This story of God's love and God's desire for our freedom is a pivotal one in our faith tradition.

And, of course, we see this same story being played out many times over in the life of Jesus.

When he fed the crowds,

when he healed the sick,

when he and cast out demons...

... he was time and time again acting to free people from the
oppressive realities that confined them and kept them trapped on
the margins of the human community.

There are, of course, many ways in which people continue to experience that sense of being
confined and trapped on the margins of the human community.

In New Zealand, 1 in 4 children, nearly 1 in three, actually, are living in poverty.

Poverty is something that holds people in captivity.

It is an oppressive reality that restricts people's lives and causes them psychological and physical harm.

The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services notes that,

“being in poverty means experiencing hunger and food insecurity, poor health outcomes, reduced life expectancy, debt, and unaffordable or bad housing”

You may have read recently that every year in New Zealand, about 40,000 children are admitted to hospital for diseases that are potentially preventable by solving poverty, housing and greater access to healthcare.

And the effects of that deprivation will be with some of those kids for the rest of their lives.

Our voting can be an act of love for those children and their families.

Our voting can be part of our commitment to a more hope-filled future, to God's good future, for those kids and their families.

Another invitation can be heard in In our gospel reading this morning.

Jesus invites his followers to live out their lives in an attitude of forgiveness.

Peter asks Jesus,

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

And Jesus responds,

“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times”.

And that figure, seventy-seven times, is not meant to be taken literally:

Jesus is not saying seventy-seven times and then no more!

What he is inviting his hearers to understand is that forgiveness, mercy and compassion are a way of life for those who would follow Jesus.

Now, this isn't to say that we should be doormats and let people walk all over us, or that we should continue to suffer abuse in our families and relationships.

Forgiveness is about helping people to move into a new and different place of understanding and freedom.

It's about offering the possibility of a new and better way of being in relationship with those around us.

Forgiveness does not require us to put up with abuse.

It requires us to challenge it and to offer the hope of a different future.

Now, of course, issues of criminal offending are complicated, but the question remains:

what would it mean for the life of the nation, for our life together, if our vote was an act of compassion, of mercy, of hope for a more hope-filled future?

One final invitation.

A couple of weeks ago we heard Jesus say to his followers,

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

I think what Jesus is calling us to in these words is a sacrificial life,

a life where we are prepared to give up our commitment to our own comfort, status, wealth and security in order to become caught up in God's desire for the world, God's desire for freedom for all of God's people.

So, as Christians, we might want to ask ourselves: who are we voting for?

Not in terms of a candidate or a party but in terms of who will ultimately benefit:

Am I voting purely in my own self interest for what will benefit me?

Or am I voting for the good of the whole community of God's people?

God loves us and God invites us to respond in love to God and to the world that God loves. And our voting can be one way in which we do that.