

**Exodus 17:1** From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages. . .

17:7 Is the Lord among us or not?

### **Jesus and Junk Politics**

The Episcopal Church has a definite view about politics and the pulpit. It is much like a flag person at a road repair site. He has a two-faced sign. One side says Stop Partisan Politics. The other side says Go Support Vulnerable People. With a few notable exceptions, once we got over supporting slavery, this was good advice that has lasted many years. It is still good advice because the Church wants congregations to be inclusive and to view all behavior, not through partisan political eyes, but through Jesus eyes. If we can include LGBTQ+ in Church we can probably accommodate conservatives and liberals.

But then a bigger than life political joke was played on the people of the United States, called “the culture wars.” In the 1960s the corporate tax rate was 50 per cent and government regulation of major industries was well developed. A small group of men wanted to change this. Lowering taxes on the super-rich and giving big industry a free hand was not exactly a political platform with mass appeal. The need existed to get masses of people to vote for a political entity that would sponsor these measures. The decision was made to use anti-abortion sentiment to effect political change. The Roman Catholic Church was already a staunch opponent of the Supreme Court case of Roe v Wade (1973) and, after some gift giving and other persuasion, the largest evangelical church, the Southern Baptists, was persuaded to change from passing resolutions praising Roe v Wade and spending church resources as a staunch proponent of the separation of church and state, to condemning Roe v Wade and questioning the correctness of the separation of church and state. So began the culture wars.

Now, once you make a pet out of a rattlesnake, you had better keep it well fed or it just may take a bite out of you! From anti-abortion to anti-gay marriage, to anti inclusiveness, to anti woke, to anti separation of church and state and anti just war doctrine; all of these culture war bites fed the snake. Eventually, the snake became larger than the people feeding it and they became its servants.

When that happened, the Episcopal church did not get into politics, so much as politics got into the church. Our diocese of West Texas shares a very long stretch of border with Mexico. We have husband and wife priests who pastor churches on both sides of the national line. The Diocese has long sponsored relief work with migrants, both documented and undocumented. It is customary for bishops from Mexico to be guests for our annual

diocesan meeting. Many programs were funded by both church and federal funds. The federal funds have all been withdrawn, but the church has maintained and expanded our outreach programs.

From the Bishop of West Texas to the Presiding Bishop the federal government has been taken to task for its brutal and capricious actions in dealing with the most vulnerable people in our country. It is reasonable to say that if the basis for a public action is to be found in the Gospels, it is illegal in Texas.

And now, to add to the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the federal government has decided to ignore the criteria for a “just war” that most nations abide by and mainline churches support.

Of the six criteria used to judge the rightness of a war, only one is met by the United States in its war with Iran, that is probability of success. If the world’s most powerful warlord can’t defeat a much smaller and weaker nation, then other factors must be at play. The other criteria are : It must be a last resort, must have right intention, be a just cause, be done by the right authority, meeting measures of comparative justice. Our war with Iran does not meet those criteria.

There are also three criteria for how a war should be fought. They are: discrimination in operations, combatants, not civilians should be targets. We have killed thousands of civilians including 180 schoolgirls from the ages 7 to 12. Minimum force is to be used. We have bragged about how much we are destroying. And proportionality in operations; that is no more force than the wrong endured by us.

This war against Iran is certainly a war of choice. Terms very favorable to the U.S. had been offered by Iran and not formally rejected by us before we began the killing and destruction. War and peace are the direct province of the church. No wonder that politics is intruding on church life and action.

When we look about us and try to disengage from politics to the best of our abilities, there are certainly times when we must imitate the Israelites when they said “Is the Lord among us or not?” The New Testament gives us the answer. Jesus is with us and His love never fails. Amen