

The other day I was going for a walk in Sutton Park. I go there for exercise, to marvel at the variety and beauty of God's creation, for peace and thinking space and prayer. As I was walking a man came up beside me and said, "What do you think about all this - the referendum?" I was a bit taken aback, as he was quite confrontational in his tone. I made some comment that I had come for a walk in the park and not really to talk about the referendum. He said, "Yes, but what do you think about all these people coming over here and living off our benefits?" I said, "Goodbye" and walked away. You might think I was a coward not to engage in conversation and share my views. It certainly made me realise how passionate some people feel about the referendum. I was sitting on a bus and two women in front of me were talking about the referendum. One was saying she didn't know how to vote and was fed up with it all. The other was saying she was voting to stay in, she had made up her mind. The conversation about the referendum seems to be everywhere and we are going to have a conversation about the referendum after the service during the Church Meeting.

I wanted to give a few reflections before we have our conversation. Let me remind you of the question that is being asked "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?" We are going to use some resources prepared by the Joint Public Issues Team - a team from the Baptist, Methodist, Church of Scotland and URC.

They suggest that the referendum question for Christians might be "To what extent does the European Union enhance or hinder our ability to love our neighbour and, in doing so, our ability to love God?"

Two of our readings today are the lectionary readings for the day. The reading from the book of Kings about Ahab, Jezebel, Naboth and Elijah. The reading from Luke about Jesus, the Pharisee and the sinful woman. The third reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians seems to me a very pertinent reading for us to read at this time. I must confess that I struggled with the lectionary readings to understand how they might address the referendum.

The three readings we have heard today seem to me to have a common theme about power. The story of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel is a story of a shocking abuse of power. Power to order others to murder Naboth for their own greedy ends. Ahab covets Naboth's vineyard and Jezebel orders the nobles of the town to bear false witness against Naboth. Certainly breaking three of the ten commandments. Elijah the prophet condemns them for their wickedness in God's name, and tells Ahab that they will be punished.

In the reading from Ephesians, Paul reminds the Ephesians of God's great power - realised in Jesus verses 17 -20,. 22-23. The final verse reminds the church that we are his body, the fullness of Jesus who fills all in all. We the

church, the body of Christ in the world, must use the power we are given by God through Jesus, to do God's will in the world. A mighty task we are called to do, not in our own strength and power, but in the strength and power given to us through Jesus.

We are called to wrestle and pray to know how we are called to use that power.

The reading from Luke has forgiveness as it's theme but we also see a picture of power in the Pharisee. In his private thoughts he is assuming a position of privilege, power and prejudice. He is mentally condemning the sinful woman and also questioning Jesus' authority because Jesus is allowing the woman to touch him. Jesus story to the Pharisee is a challenge to his assumption of superiority. The Pharisee had assumed he was so superior he did not even need to arrange the common courtesies of foot washing, greeting and anointing of Jesus as his guest. He seems to have been more interested in the kudos that having Jesus in his house gave him than really wanting to understand what was Jesus' message. I find this passage intriguing because it gives us the Pharisee's thoughts. How our thoughts that no-one else knows about, but God, reveal the real us, who we think we are. Those thoughts can be painful for us to contemplate about ourselves.

How might these three aspects of power inform our decision making in the referendum?

Each one of us who is able to vote has power. Our democracy gives us the power to use our vote to be engaged in deciding the future of our country in the referendum and the many implications that decision will have. The story of Naboth's vineyard challenges us to use our power responsibly and not for personal greed. Perhaps you think that having a crown to take home with you today is a bit childish but I would ask you to put it somewhere where it will jog your memory, to ask yourself how you are using your power when you vote in the referendum.

The reading from Ephesians reminds us that we have power through Jesus and that we are called to use that power as His body in the world. The criteria for our decision making is WWJD Do you remember the wrist bands people used to wear - what would Jesus do? By studying his teaching and his actions as our example, we must prayerfully make up our minds as to what we believe Jesus' decision would be and do likewise.

The reading from Luke painfully asks us to examine ourselves and our own innermost thoughts. Do we assume a position of privilege, power and superiority? Do our thoughts become prejudiced about other people? When we make our decision, may it be to give service to others, emulating the whole hearted service offered by the sinful woman to Jesus.

So from our three readings I offer you three criteria for your decision making. That your decision is not made for personal greed.

That you are a part of the body of Christ in the world and as such your decision should be made by using Jesus' example as your guide.

That your decision is offered as whole-hearted service to others.

May God bless us and give us wisdom as we continue the conversation and as we exercise our power.

Let us pray -

Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counsellor,

We bring our prayers to you this morning in our need.

We have a decision to make.

A decision which will have long reaching repercussions,

for us and our families, for our neighbours and friends,

For our country and its people, for the countries of the EU,

For the people of the world and for your creation.

God of Wisdom, this might sound melodramatic,

is our decision really that important? We believe that it is.

We hear so many opinions about how our decision will effect the

future.

We become bewildered or bored, confused and upset, angry and hurt.

We hear people we respect offering very different advice.

We want to do what Jesus would do but he didn't vote in a referendum.

Please give us clarity of thought to understand your priorities,

a vision of the world that Jesus asked us to seek.

We know that, just like everyone else, we can never really understand all the implications that will result from our decision.

We know we will not necessarily agree which way we will vote.

We ask for ourselves enough for our need and not for our greed.

Prayerfully we come to you, seeking your help as to what we should do.

May our decision be made with integrity, holding you as the final arbiter, the guide who walks with us every step of the way.

We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.