

Ambrose Politics and Power

It is the year 383 and we are in Milan. Milan, not Rome, is now the capital city of the Western Roman Empire and that empire is in trouble. The Roman Army has just been trounced by the Visigoths. There is a major civil war and one emperor has died running away from another. The current Emperor, Valentinian II, is just twelve years old. Power and who has it are the things that matter, and in Milan there are two people who *really* matter, the emperor's mother, a rather alarming woman called Justina and the Bishop, Ambrose.

In 383 the Roman Empire is technically Christian, though the truth is a bit more complicated than that and, in Milan, it is *very* complicated. If you could just look thoughtful for a moment, I need to teach you a heresy; we need to know it to make sense of our story. There are two kinds of Christians in Milan. There are Christians who say that the Jesus has the same identity as God. And there are other Christians, called Arians, who say that Jesus is *like* God. Now that does not sound much, but it makes all the difference. If Jesus and God are the very same then God lived amongst us, we can really believe that a human being can know God. If Jesus is only *like* God, that stops being true, God is a stranger, just a bit like some things we know. After this sermon we will say the creed and the words 'of one being with the Father'. We say those precisely precisely because of this argument. That phrase, 'of one being' that we use every Sunday is there because you and I are not Arians. And in Milan, Ambrose was an orthodox Christian, but Justina was an Arian.

Now Justina, the Arian, wanted a church of her own, an Arian church. Ambrose, the Bishop, stood in her palace and refused her. On the streets of Milan, Christians pushed past the imperial guard and occupied the church she was after. First set to Ambrose. A law was then passed. It became illegal to interfere with Arian worship. Second Set to Justina. Then, on the Wednesday in Holy Week, Justina asked again for a church, and this time not so nicely. Soldiers, armed to the teeth, put up imperial heraldry ready for an Arian Easter service. Third Set to Justina. So Ambrose preached a startling (and staggeringly offensive) sermon. He talked about Job and how much he suffered and then he said that Job's greatest trial came from his wife. Ambrose listed all the nasty women he could think of: Jezebel and Herodias and everyone knew he was talking about the Empress. Now it sounds like sexism, then people heard Ambrose say that this fight with Justina was epic, the sort of story you find in the bible. Again the crowd backed him. Furious, the Empress backed down. Fourth Set, and then the match, to Ambrose.

Still Ambrose was not done with politics. The civil war in the Empire continued. The boy Emperor was in danger and Theodosius, the Emperor in the East, saved the day. But, not long after that young Valentinian II was found hanging in his own palace and Theodosius suddenly ruled the whole empire. These empresses and emperors are not the sort of people you would invite to tea. In 390 there was a riot in Thessalonica. Theodosius moved quickly to calm things down and invited the Thessalonians to a circus to celebrate the restoration of order. When they arrived his soldiers killed them, killed 7,000 people. Ambrose promptly excommunicated the Emperor and wrote him a stiff letter

You are a man and temptation has come upon you; conquer it.

There is a lot more you can say about Ambrose, about his life and teaching but I am not going to say it. I am interested in one thing this morning and that is what Ambrose tells about faith and power, faith and politics. And it all turns on what he wrote to soldier emperor, Theodosius

You are a man and temptation has come upon you; conquer it.

But how does that help us? What are we supposed to say now about bombing in Syria? What are we supposed to say when it seems as though it is religion that divides us, Muslim, Christian, Jew, in Syria, Iraq, in the UK, France and the USA, in North Africa; Muslim Christian and Hindu in India. Faith is volatile.

We have to say something we do not have the luxury of silence. This morning's gospel gave us the voice of John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness of Judea. It is an Old Testament he looks and sounds like one of the prophets demanding justice, announcing judgement.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Luke 3:7

That is *outspoken*. The gospel is all about words. It is good news; that is what the word *gospel* means. Christians have something to say. Silence is not our default setting. And let's get one thing straight quickly. The bible is interested in power and what you do with it. The tradition behind John the Baptist is a political tradition. The presiding idea in the Old Testament is that Israel has a God and the prophets keep asking, 'If you know you have a God what difference does that make to you?' The answer again and again is that God is a God of justice and his people must be a people of justice. When John the Baptist preaches you hear two themes. First there is a big picture, the promise of judgement, urgency, a belief that God is coming to his world.

Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

That is the first thing John says, that there is a God who delivers justice. He starts with God.

Then John goes on to say something about us, declaring that our decisions and our actions matter.

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise

John the Baptist preaches compassion, generosity, and care for the poor. He has more to say: tax collectors must not extort money, soldiers must abuse power.

Christian faith is not just interested in justice, it is inseparable from justice. When we forget that we become a cult interested only in our own survival. We draw lines, we speak of them and us. We peddle hatred and call it 'biblical witness'. We talk about evangelism as though it is making sure there are more people like us.

This is Advent, the start of the church's year we are at the beginning of the Christian story. Let's remind ourselves how the faith starts, what it is about. We believe in a God born in Bethlehem, living amongst us. We believe that this life, our life, is a glimpse of the glory of God. Irenaeus used to say *the Glory of God is a human being fully alive*. Christian faith is not a vague promise of heaven, or a sanctuary for the self-righteous, it is a deep commitment to life. When Jesus preached he preached a Kingdom, a place where humans live together in peace. We believe in life lived fully, in community, in justice and peace. We call that theology; nearly everyone else calls that politics.

Our politics has one unflinching conviction. It is the conviction of Ambrose, the conviction of John the Baptist. We believe in God. We believe life matters because God gave it and lives it. We believe that in the midst of the storm and the fury we can be rescued and forgiven because there is a God who redeems and forgives. We do not make up our own rules, we do not save ourselves, we do not hope to be slightly better than we have been. We believe in God. The thing that marks us out is the absolute conviction that what you see is not what you get. There is more. There is God.

That's what Ambrose knew. When he told Theodosius *You are a man*, he was making a theological point. You might be the most powerful person on the planet, the emperor of east and west, but you are a man and there is a God. That's the conviction that marks us out. 'You are a man, tempted to be less than you can be, and a man who can be forgiven'.

Our faith is fundamentally political and it is shaped by that conviction that the future is not ours but God's. In the midst of hideous and possibly necessary compromises that commit us to fight violence with violence we have to strain to remind ourselves that we not defined by those compromises. We can still look for more, pray for more, and hope for more. We must and will speak of forgiveness; must and will look for redemption.

Ambrose provides a summons to apply conviction with courage. Faith is practice, it is not what you think, it is what you do and evangelism is the proclamation of a Kingdom we can share. That baby lying in the manger will overturn empires.