

Romans 13.1-7

I wonder if any of you have come across “The brick Bible”.

I bought this copy in the Christian bookshop near St Paul’s cathedral, but you can find it online if you want to.

It looks very appealing; the sort of thing you might pick up, flick through and think, “I’ll buy that for the grandchildren for Christmas.”

But if you turn to page ? you will find today’s bible reading from Romans 13. Above the words “Everyone must submit to governing authorities, for those in positions of authority have been placed there by God” is a picture of Adolf Hitler and adoring crowds raising their hands in a Nazi salute.

This is not a fun and innocent children’s version of the bible, but an attempt by an avowed atheist to mock the Scriptures.

I tell you this partly to urge you to be discerning about what you buy your children and grandchildren, and also to be discerning about what you read yourself – all that glitters is not gold and not everything that purports to be Christian is...

But I also tell you this to illustrate that our Epistle reading today is a very difficult passage of Scripture; a passage open to misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

What does Paul mean when he says, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established”?

Could it be that Paul is really saying that Christians must obey unquestioningly the rulers of the country in which they live?

Could it be that Paul would have said to the Church in 1930s Germany, “of course you must do whatever Hitler says. He is the ruler of God’s choosing.”

As always with the Scriptures we must be careful to understand one passage in the light of the whole – “as we’ve said before, a text out of context is just a con”.

On the whole, the Scriptures are very positive about the need for all people to submit to the authorities placed over them.

God is portrayed as a God of order, not disorder (1 Corinthians 14.33).

In various passages of the bible submission is urged to the civic authorities, religious leaders and to heads of households.

Even when defeated, taken into exile and forced to live under non-Israelite kings, God urged his people through the prophet Jeremiah to seek the good of the land in which they lived and to pray for its welfare (Jeremiah 29.7).

Yet alongside this command to submit to authority, there is a very clear understanding that the right of kings is not absolute. All authority is ever only exercised under God and for the purpose *he* gives it.

Those in what we might call government are to exercise their power to maintain law and order and to protect the rights of all (Romans 13.3).

In the Old testament, when those in authority acted outside, or contrary to, their God-given authority then the prophets were not afraid to say so;

And when told not to preach the gospel by the Sanhedrin in the New testament, Peter and the Apostles replied “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5.29).

Perhaps Jesus instruction to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” is instructive:

We must obey those in authority over us in all things where those in authority are acting legitimately;

But when they abuse their authority and claim an allegiance that should only be given to God, then Christians must submit to the higher authority that is God himself.

So, how are we to apply Paul’s words in Romans 13.1-7 to our circumstances today?

Romans 13.1: Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.

In our context I would suggest that this will include our elected government and its officials, the judiciary, the leaders of the church and if we are employed our employer.

Why?

Romans 13.5: for fear of possible punishment and for conscience.

For conscience (13.2) because those in authority exist by God's providence to uphold law and order, and rebellion against them constitutes rebellion against God. We will not want to do that!

For fear of punishment (13.3-4), because those in authority do have the means to punish the disobedient as well as to reward those who do good.

Christians should be model citizens.

Paul goes on to give an example: the payment of taxes;

Christians will pay their fair share of taxes (verse 6-7); recognising that it is a legitimate role of the government to raise revenue and spend it on its legitimate activities.

I think Paul might also expect us to keep to the speed limit, be honest in declaring our age when signing into Whatsapp and not watching Youtube videos of cats surfboarding on work time.

As a church we might not like all the bureaucracy of safeguarding and GDPR; and it might be easier to 'offer a free glass of alcohol in exchange for a donation' rather to get an alcohol licence, but we will do our best to comply.

But I think, when Paul gave the command to the Romans to submit to those in authority, he had more in mind than giving those with the responsibility of leadership the support they need; recognising God's plan for good order and staying out of trouble.

In 1 Timothy 2 Paul urges Timothy to pray for those in authority.

Why?

So that there might be peace and so that the gospel might go out and people be saved.

Although Paul had his run ins with the authorities, indeed in the end being put to death at the command of Caesar; he and the early church also benefitted from the stability that Rome brought.

Paul was able to traverse the Mediterranean because of the relatively ease and safety of travel that resulted from a stable and well-ordered Empire. His Roman citizenship afforded him certain rights and protections.

At heart, Paul was a missionary and church planter. A good and stable government makes that task so much easier.

We might be cynical about Government's love of the church when it gets stuck in to providing homeless shelters, foodbanks, debt advice, dementia care, fostering and adoption support, street pastors. An army of committed and trustworthy volunteers comes a lot cheaper than government funded initiatives.

But might it not be that when the church makes the life of government easier by obeying all the legitimate rules of civil society, and when she contributes to the welfare of civil society by her practical action, then people see the church for what she really is, and is drawn to the One she seeks to follow?

Maybe then we also gain credibility in the public square when seeking to influence public policy.

The National Secular Society makes a lot of noise and is not afraid to put forward its views. But I would question how much we should listen to a society which offers very little practical help for anyone other than itself.

“By their fruit shall ye know them...” (Matthew 7.15)

As Christians we must involve ourselves in the public square. There will often not be one simple Christian answer to the questions of the day. Not all Christians voted remain!

We have no right to demand that our voice prevail in a modern liberal democracy.

But we can add a distinctively Christian flavour to the debate, offered with grace and love.

I wanted, finally, to address the issue of what we should do as Christians when we simply, in conscience, cannot go along with what those in authority decree. In Christian circles at the moment I sense a growing feeling that Daniel is a man for our times.

Daniel served faithfully under an unbelieving king, but when ordered not to pray he continued to do what he knew was right, even when it put him in grave danger.

The time may well be coming when conscience will not let us go along with the society in which we live. Issues of human sexuality are likely to one pinch point. But we must remain in society as salt to flavour and light to guide for as long and as much as we can; and then on those issues we can't, we will have to make the choice and with the Apostles of long ago say lovingly and graciously "I'm sorry, but we must obey God rather than man".