

A vote of yes/no confidence

Various Passages

Do you know how you are going to vote this week? Do you know why? What's a good reason for voting yes? What's a good reason for voting no? If you're going to decide on the basis of what's going to put an extra £500 in your pocket every year like the politicians seem to think, you can just go home now.

This morning, I am not going to advise you what to vote. I want us to hear something from God's Word not about *what* to vote (because we won't find that in Scripture), but *how* to vote - that is, what considerations and attitudes God's people in Christ Jesus should have in voting.

So we'll look first of all at something of absolute first importance to have straight in our hearts and minds *before* we vote. Then I'd like us to think (and talk) about what God's Word calls us to be concerned about *as we cast* our votes. And finally, there is something deeply important to think about for the days that follow *after* we vote.

Question - Where is your citizenship? What do you consider your primary identity?

Let's read together Philippians 3:17-4:1...

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

But our citizenship is in Heaven. *And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body. Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!*

You are not Scottish. You are not British. If you have begun a new life with Jesus Christ, your citizenship is in *Heaven*. I want to insist on this in the Lord - every one of you who has confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, King and Rescuer, is a citizen of Heaven, and *that* is what defines you.

Paul was a Roman citizen. In the 1st century Mediterranean, Paul travelled around many places, crossing cities and regions and nations - but everywhere he went, he carried that status of 'citizen of Rome.' Not everyone was a citizen of Rome - only those to whom the authorities of Rome bestowed the privileged and elevated status.

These people might not be in Rome - many of them were born outside Rome and had never yet arrived there - but everywhere that they went, they carried that status of 'Roman citizen' as their primary and public identity marker.

Paul used that well known experience as an analogy for his first century audience. When Paul tells the Christians in the Philippian church that they are 'citizens of Heaven,' he is telling them that this is where their defining identity lies, first and foremost. Not everyone is a citizen of Heaven - only those who have accepted God's call to change sides and belong to His Kingdom through bowing the knee to Christ the King.

And we, of course, are not physically in Heaven. Not yet. But although we have not yet arrived there, right now that is where our citizenship is, and that is our primary and public identity marker.

This week more than ever, we're in the business of publicly expressing our identities. 'I'm British... I'm Scottish... I'm Scottish and British...' And of course we might all feel a sense of national identity in one or other of these ways, along with others in Scotland. When I say, 'You are not Scottish or British,' it is to make the point clear - if you are a Christian, that simply must not be your primary identity, public or private.

Many of us have yes or no posters proudly displayed in the windows of our cars and houses. That's fine. But I wonder whether, whatever the result is come Friday morning, we might express our citizenship in Heaven as publicly as we've expressed our campaign allegiances.

I think we've been treating our citizenship in Heaven like a fairytale or a hobby on the side for long enough. It's time to reclaim it as our genuinely political identity. It's a well worn idea that you don't mix faith with politics. Keep your faith to yourself, and we'll all be allowed to privately believe whatever we like.

Well, that's not the faith in Christ of the New Testament. In a world where you had to say, 'Caesar is Lord' or be killed, Christians boldly declared, 'Jesus is

Lord,' and they were killed. As Ephesians 2 tells us, those who had been deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines as Jews and Gentiles were made one in identity and purpose and life in Jesus Christ, ready to live and die by that.

Those of us in Christ who are divided along the lines of 'yes' and 'no' are called to be united not by something smaller than that or just as important as that, but something truly *bigger* than that - together campaigning in this world that 'Jesus is Lord.' This is our politics.

We are on our way to an eternal home with a perfect King, and all the passing powers and systems and governments of man will disappear. We are on our way to a real renewal of Heaven and Earth that will not be undermined by broken promises, exaggerated rhetoric, institutional sin or an uncertain future any more, because Jesus Christ will reign completely, supremely, unquestionably, unendingly.

But the citizens of Heaven are walking this Earth, and this nation, to be part of God's renewing politics *right now, and together.*

Christians are people who believe that whatever the outcomes of our democratic processes, the truth is there is a King over this world called Jesus Christ. We are to live, behave, campaign, speak out controversially and at personal social cost - and indeed vote - according to what *He* says is right and wrong, good and bad, true and false.

We may form different conclusions about how to do that best in Scotland, and how to vote on Thursday. But let's get this straight right now with an identity shaping referendum in sight - our identity is already shaped and bound together as God's people in Christ. We are citizens of Heaven.

Question - What seems more 'real' to you - the transient parliaments of Westminster and Holyrood, or the everlasting Kingdom of God?

As we head into the week, and as we head into the voting booth, what are the concerns that the citizens of Heaven should have in voting for God's purposes in this temporary place we live called Scotland? There is much public debate about economics, social justice and national identity. As Christians, how does our primary identity as God's people seeking *His* will affect our reasons for voting?

Our primary politics are to make it known to this world that ‘Jesus is Lord and Saviour,’ and to seek His renewing will done in this nation. So as you vote, God’s people might have two questions in their minds that matter not a bit to others but are actually of first importance for us:

Is Independence or Union more likely to allow the flourishing of the gospel news in Scotland that Jesus is Lord and Saviour?

Is Independence or Union more likely to foster God’s Kingdom values to renew His world?

Luke 4 contains something which biblical scholars often refer to as ‘The Nazareth Manifesto.’ It’s Jesus’ white paper. It’s His reason for coming into public, political ministry. It’s who He is and what He is about.

Luke 4:16-21 says this:

He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom. And He stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him, and He began by saying to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

This was Jesus announcing to those who were listening, ‘I have come to bring release, reconciliation and restoration.’ Some other day I would love to preach more fully about how this chapter is telling us this, but here’s the bottom line:

Jesus said He had come to *release* human beings from everything that holds down and oppresses us; to *restore* us to the wholeness of life as God created it, intends it, and is renewing it; and to *reconcile* people to God and to one another.

There is a universal oppression that affects every human being in every time and place - the powers of sin and death. Jesus offers release from these, restoration to life now and forever, and reconciliation with God.

There are also a variety of oppressions that affect different people in different times and places - poverty, addiction, crime, persecution, disability, social marginalisation, sickness, and plenty others. Jesus' ministry brought release from all of these local and particular oppressions, restoration to wholeness, and reconciliation between people in His community.

Luke tells us that the mission of Jesus is the same mission that His Church has. All that Jesus began to do and teach, He carries on through His Church - that's the point of the book of Acts, and how it begins in 1:1.

The Church is in this world in Jesus' name to speak for and act for release from oppression, restoration to wholeness, and reconciliation with God and with others, in Jesus name. You and me are in 21st century Scotland *for that*. This is our politics.

Throughout Scripture and throughout history, we've seen that the *universal* oppression of sin and death is *absolutely dealt with to a total extent for every person* who believes what the Church proclaims: 'Repent and believe the good news - Jesus is Lord and Saviour.' Whatever kind of nation we live in, that's a task we set about in Jesus' name.

Throughout Scripture and throughout history, we've seen release to *various relative extents* from poverty or illness or social exclusion or whatever the local oppression is, *for as many people as God's people can help* - although all too many are missed. Whatever kind of nation we live in, that's a task we set about in Jesus' name.

So when I get to Thursday and have to choose where to put my cross, what does the cross of Christ lead me to consider? What might we gain and what might we lose for the Kingdom of God in this referendum?

Firstly, if we vote yes, we might lose some gospel freedom. As things stand, the Church of Scotland in particular has a particular constitutional freedom by an Act of the UK Parliament. The Church of Scotland Act 1921 provides for our national Church to govern its own affairs in 'matters spiritual.' That means it is up to us what we believe is right and wrong under God's Word, and we can organise our structures, resources and employment accordingly.

It is not that the Church of Scotland is joined up with the state in a similar way to the structures of the Church of England. What we have at present is a constitutionally assured freedom to be *separate* from the state and free to have our beliefs inform every part of our life, work and existence as a church.

If Scotland becomes independent, a new constitution would be written, and whilst there is the promise of the kind of freedom of private religion you would expect from any modern democracy; there is no constitutional guarantee of freedom for the Church to make employment decisions that exclude people on the basis of sexual activity or exclusive beliefs about Jesus being the only truth about God.

What would that mean for the flourishing of the gospel in Scotland? You'll need to weigh that up. It could be that the government of an independent Scotland would enshrine the same freedoms the Church has now. Or maybe we'll lose them.

But remember, the question I asked was not 'what will make the Church safest and most comfortable in Scotland?' It was, 'Is Independence or Union more likely to allow the flourishing of the gospel news in Scotland that Jesus is Lord and Saviour?'

You might take the view that it's better to vote no, because there is a better chance of protecting our freedoms to declare the exclusive truth that Jesus is Lord and Saviour. Maybe protecting our freedoms is going to mean more people hearing the gospel and coming to faith in Christ. Maybe it's worth doing all we can to protect and cherish the freedom for gospel sharing we know, rather than gambling it on an unknown.

You might take the view, though, that this is not a reason to hold back from voting yes. Even if a new secular socialist republic removes freedoms and privileges from the Church, and we end up getting in trouble, getting sued and going to prison for declaring what we believe; history suggests that the gospel tends to flourish more in that context.

Within this church, we'll probably take different views about that. But have your eyes open and know what you're letting yourself in for. Consider the message we have as a Church to declare about the universal oppression of sin and death and how people can only find release, restoration and reconciliation in Christ; and what is best for that message.

Secondly, if we vote yes, we might gain some world-renewing Kingdom values. The strongest argument that I have read amongst Christian Yes campaigners for a gospel interest in Independence centres around social justice in society. There is much talk of an economically and socially more just society being enabled by breaking with Westminster and having Scotland's people more directly influence Scottish society.

The Yes campaign have been much more vocal about social justice and equality than Better Together, and that at least suggests that the agenda of those campaigning for Independence really does focus more on some of the things that Jesus' mission manifesto is about - good news for the poor. Release for the oppressed. Restoration to a greater wholeness of life.

It is very possible that an Independent Scottish government might implement policies that will bless the marginalised and prosper the oppressed more than the status quo. Closing the gap between the rich and the poor. Clamping down on tax evaders at least as hard as benefit cheats. Being rid of nuclear arms from our nation and putting government money into restoring life instead. All of this must be a real consideration for the citizens of Heaven as we vote.

But we should consider this questioningly. *How* is an Independent Scotland going to address local oppressions like poverty and inequality? Is secular socialism the hope of the world? Is it not the local church that is the hope of the world, so that actually, whatever political systems we choose for ourselves, it's up to the *Church* to express the values of the Kingdom of God, not the society it lives in?

And most importantly in our questioning is this: The citizens of Heaven are all people who know that sin is a reality that needs confessed and forgiven. The citizens (and politicians) of Scotland are not, for the most part. We know about the reality of institutional sin - that sin warps not just me and my life, but all of our institutions and indeed governments. They would still be broken, flawed, selfish human beings who would govern us in an Independent Scotland, just like the rest of us.

The second question I asked earlier was, 'Is Independence or Union more likely to foster God's Kingdom values to renew His world?'

You could take the view that there is no compelling reason to vote yes on these grounds, because you do not believe in utopian politics and that changing structures is going to change the lives of the locally oppressed for

the better. You might consider that an Independent Scotland is no more likely to see God's Kingdom values fostered to release local oppressions than the UK currently does, or you may conclude it is all supposed to depend on the Church anyway.

Or you could take the view that you should vote yes, because whatever the realities of human sin and selfishness, you are optimistic that actually, yes, an Independent Scotland is *more likely* to foster Kingdom values of local release, restoration and reconciliation than we'll see in Scotland at present; and the Church is more likely to see it's mission enabled as a result.

A final consideration for the citizens of Heaven is this. The New Testament strongly sounds the theme that God's Word to us can be summed up in two commands: The first is 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.' We discover in Jesus Christ that we can only do that as we turn from rebellion against God, and run back to Him forgiven by Christ's death and brought into a life of worshipping love through His resurrection.

The second is 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Jesus sums it up this way in Luke 10, Paul does the same in Romans 13 and Galatians 5. So which way of voting best fulfills that command?

Some Christians in the debate have suggested that voting no best loves our neighbour. The trend of God's mission and activity in the world throughout the Bible narrative is always towards inclusiveness. Let it be said, it's an inclusiveness where Jesus dictates what behaviour is right and wrong - but it is an ever-increasing inclusiveness and bringing together of people.

It is to go backwards from that, then, to separate when we don't need to. It is to move in a less inclusive trajectory, the other way from God. And it is to abandon our actual neighbours. We are saying, 'things are not being run in the UK boat very well, so we want to jump ship and build our own Scottish boat. We're not really worried about what happens to the rest of you on that UK boat, we're taking what belongs to us and we're off.'

An example of that is the posturing going on over the currency. 'If you don't give us a formal currency union, we're not taking any of the national debt. It's your problem, not ours.' The argument from Christians in the Better Together campaign is that Independence means not *loving* our neighbours, but *walking away* from them and jealously guarding our oil and other resources.

On the other side, some Christians suggest that voting yes best loves our neighbour. 'Who is our neighbour?' That's the question that a man asked Jesus in Luke 10, and in reply he was told the story of the Good Samaritan.

What we discover as Jesus teaches that story is that our neighbours are not the people we share national identity with (e.g., the United Kingdom). They are all the people, of whatever nationality, race, ethnicity and background, whom we come into contact with every day. They are, in particular, those before us who are most in need, and those who helped us when we were most in need.

So this goes back to the belief that in an Independent Scotland, we will be better resourced and encouraged to love our neighbours, as we begin to live in a place that commits to greater support for the oppressed and marginalised.

It would be a failure to love our neighbours in need to miss this chance to make a change to improve their lives, and to abandon them to a Westminster that has failed them for generations. It would be a failure for us to choose to perpetuate a system that imposes the bedroom tax on vulnerable members of our society.

Whatever your view on that, as a citizen of Heaven, when you vote on Thursday you will need to weigh up, 'How do we obey God's command to love our neighbours best?'

Question - Is Independence or Union more likely to allow the flourishing of the gospel news in Scotland that Jesus is Lord and Saviour?

Is Independence or Union more likely to foster God's Kingdom values to renew His world?

Come Friday morning, there will be a lot of emotion for all of us to deal with. Some of us are going to easy-oasy. But some of us will be elated, and others of us will be gutted. I want to finish this morning by reminding us of something loud and clear in the Bible that we will all need to remember come Friday morning.

This is especially important for those of us who will be saddened, disappointed or really worried on Friday morning. We don't know yet which of us they will be, but here's the message that we all need to hear: *God is sovereign.*

In Genesis we read the story of Joseph. It spans several chapters, and the biggest point of the whole thing is this: God is sovereign. There is nothing that can or will stop His plan or thwart His purposes. And He is at work in every circumstance - good and bad, in palaces and in prisons - to bring about what He intends for the blessing of the world.

Joseph goes from being sold as a slave by his brothers to being imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, miles from his homeland and family. He goes through what can only be described as awful and deeply worrying times. But then, he is released from prison and made a prince, in charge of administering food storage for the coming famine crisis.

God sees Joseph's life, and the nations of Israel and Egypt, hit highs and lows, ups and downs - but He uses it all for the blessing of both nations, and for His mission in this world. Joseph recognises this, and assures his brothers of this, in Genesis 45:4-8...

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be ploughing and reaping.

"But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."

To those who will be celebrating on Friday, I say this: Be gentle with those who opposed you earlier in the week, and are scared about the future now. Just as Joseph was with his brothers. Recognising God's goodness and sovereignty leads to that kind of behaviour.

To those who will be disappointed on Friday, I say this: God knows what He's doing. He is sovereign. He is in charge of all the affairs of these temporary, passing nations; and He brings about His purposes for the saving and renewing of the world through all of these upheavals.

What feels tumultuous to us this week is but one line of the great history that God is writing in His creation; and there is a day when we will come to a

country far surpassing anything we could ever try to forge for ourselves in Union or Independence.

God is sovereign. And every subject of His, every citizen of Heaven, knows this to be true. So go and vote with all your heart, seeking the good of the gospel along with the good of the nation. But first and foremost, love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength... and love your neighbour as yourself.

Let us be citizens of Heaven, blessing and renewing this world on our way, but walking together, shedding our flags, and taking up the cross arm in arm and shoulder to shoulder.