



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

IF JESUS DEBATED SENATOR KERRY AND PRESIDENT BUSH

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. George F. Regas, Rector Emeritus
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If Jesus debated Senator Kerry and President Bush...

I'm grateful that so many came to this debate two days before the election. Many have described the November 2nd Presidential election as the most critically important election of our lifetime. Wherever you place yourself with this sentiment, I doubt that any of you look at this election with indifference.

Let me quickly make two statements to relieve some of the anxiety you bring to this debate.

Jesus does win! And I don't intend to tell you how to vote.

Sometimes during my years as Rector, a few parishioners would say I operated in this way: "We can just agree to disagree. You go your way and I'll go God's way!" No, I'm just kidding.

Good people of profound faith will be for either George Bush or John Kerry for reasons deeply rooted in their faith. I want you to hear me on this. Yet I want to say as clearly as I can how I see Jesus impacting your vote and mine. Both Senator Kerry and President Bush are devout Christians—one a Roman Catholic and the other a Methodist.

Against the teachings of Jesus, listen in as Kerry and Bush debate three hugely important issues this morning: ending war and violence, eliminating poverty, and holding tenaciously to hope.

I

Senator Kerry and President Bush are engaged in a titanic battle for The White House. Central to their race for the presidency is the quest for peace. How deeply the world longs for peace. President Bush has led us into war with Iraq as a response to terrorism.

Yet I believe Jesus would say to Bush and Kerry: "War is itself the most extreme form of terrorism. President Bush, you have not made dramatically clear what have been the human consequences of the war in Iraq. More than 1,100 U.S. soldiers dead, 8,000 wounded—some disabled for life, and now the latest figures say 100,000 Iraqi fighters, women, and children are dead. Oh, the cost of your war.

“Your fundamental premise for the massive violence of this war is that it is the proper response to the terrorist attack that took place September 11, 2001. But remember—the killing of innocent people to achieve some desired goal is morally repudiated by anyone claiming to follow me as their savior and guide.”

Jesus looking at the United States, the most powerful nation in the history of civilization, disavows any path that affirms grief must lead to war; Jesus refuses to accept the violence of war as the necessary consequences of our tragic losses on September 11th.

Maybe you are calling Jesus naïve, but he points us to the truest reality in the universe: “Mercy brings mercy and revenge brings revenge. Tragically, your world refuses to learn this truth even after so many bitter experiences in every part of the world. Mercy brings mercy, Revenge brings revenge.”

How Jesus mourns the death of those 3,000 people killed on September 11th. But Jesus also mourns the death, devastation, and loss in Afghanistan and Iraq and Sudan and Israel/Palestine and in so many other parts of the world. They too are part of God’s precious human family.

Jesus would say to us: “Yes, mourn the deaths of those closest to you who have died; yet it is troublesome that you in America could get so caught up in the tragedy of September 11 without ever noticing all my children who have been blown apart by this war, and the 30,000 children under five years of age across the globe who die every **day** of malnutrition and hunger. My heart can hardly bear it.”

Jesus confronts both Senator Kerry and President Bush: “I will tell you what I think of your war—The sin at the heart of this war against Iraq is your belief that an American life is of more value than an Iraqi life. That an American child is more precious than an Iraqi baby.”

“God loathes war. At the time of the trauma of September 11th you did not have to declare war. You could have said to the American people and the world, ‘**We will respond** but not in kind. We will not seek to avenge the death of innocent Americans by the death of innocent victims elsewhere, lest we become what we abhor.’ ”

Jesus continues: “Mr. President, your doctrine of preemptive war is a failed doctrine. Forcibly changing the regime of an enemy that posed no imminent threat has led to disaster.

“It will take years for the widely felt hostility in Iraq and around the world to ebb. The consequences of arrogance, accompanied by certitude that the world’s most powerful military can cure all ills, should be burned into America’s memory forever.

“President Bush, Senator Kerry: will you save us from all this suffering. But God’s only hands are yours and all who call upon my Name. In the midst of great suffering, I call out to you; ‘Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the Children of God.’ ”

Jesus turns to President Bush again with deep sadness. “Is what I hear really true? Do you really mean that you want to end a decade-old ban on developing nuclear battlefield

weapons, as well as endorsing the creation of a nuclear “bunker-blasters” bomb? Are you really going to resume nuclear testing? That is sheer insanity.”

“This only encourages nations to build their nuclear arsenal in defense against you. This is morally indefensible.”

Jesus grows more insistent. “The development of battlefield nuclear weapons and threatening their use against ‘rogue’ nations and willing to strike first is a dangerous change of policy. Talk of winnable nuclear war is the greatest illusion. I am indignant when I hear people in your government saying a nuclear war could end for anyone as a victory.”

Everything I know about Jesus would have him uttering those words.

From my own study, prayer, reflection and dialogue, I say that nuclear war is the enemy. Anyone who can avoid seeing the horror of that has lost his soul. The political reality that nuclear war still remains an option for America and other countries is the paramount horror of modern existence.

The nuclear bomb is the most outright evil thing that human beings ever created. What does it say about the moral values of a nation that puts its security in nuclear weapons that are morally outrageous? I believe that Jesus calls us to be nuclear *abolitionists* through the political process. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the Children of God.”

When you go to the polls on November 2nd—vote all your values. Jesus places on your heart this question: Who is to be trusted as the world’s chief peacemaker?

II

If Jesus debated President Bush and Senator Kerry, he would say to them: “Why is so little mentioned about the poor?”

Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth saying, “I have come to preach the good news to the poor and liberation to those who are oppressed.” Poverty is a religious issue.

The gap between rich and poor is greater than it has been in 50 years. The poor are getting poorer, the health care crisis is getting worse, the income of the typical household is stagnating, the average weekly wages have fallen, and the safety net for the unemployed and the casualties of the American system has been shredded. And in the midst of all that, President Bush asks and gets income tax reductions where 50% of the tax savings goes to the top 1% of the wealthiest Americans, those averaging \$1,200,000 a year in income.

All of that would break Jesus’ heart.

For one ordained to preach God’s word – my challenge to all of this is not class warfare. Prophetic Christianity has lost its voice. The Religious Right has drowned out everyone else. Now the faith of Jesus has come to be known as pro-rich, pro-war, and pro-American.

Bill Moyers says these Religious Right advocates have hijacked Jesus. “The very Jesus who stood at Nazareth and proclaimed, ‘The Lord has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor.’ The very Jesus who told 5,000 hungry people that all of you will be fed, not just some of you. The very Jesus who offered kindness and mercy to the prostitute and hospitality to the outcast. This very Jesus who drove the money changers from the Temple. This Jesus has been hijacked and turned into the guardian of privilege instead of a champion of the dispossessed.”

But Jesus enters the debate and says to President Bush and Senator Kerry: “Poverty is a central issue in this political campaign. Your times cry out for a new politics of justice. This is not a partisan issue. But your failure and the failure of so many political leaders to help uplift those in poverty here and around the world—this will be judged a moral failure.”

Poverty is a religious issue and it is central to this presidential election November 2nd.

Some time ago, the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan warned the world that we are so preoccupied with terrorism and the weapons of mass destruction that we continue to ignore the real threats facing humankind.

“The fears that stalk most people,” he said, “are those of poverty, starvation, unemployment and deadly diseases—NOT nuclear, biological or chemical weapons.”

Jesus would say with absolute clarity to Senator Kerry and President Bush: “There is something decadent about a Nation that denies human solidarity, that’s more interested in private wealth than public wealth. There is something corrupting about the assumption that a few have the right to good health, dignified jobs, fine education and decent housing—while others live in misery.”

Now as your preacher, I want to stay with the issue of poverty— but go to another level. I want to say a few words about abortion and reproductive choice.

Whether you are pro choice or against abortion, you do not have the right in this diverse, pluralistic society to force your beliefs and opinion on others. Nor does the President of the United States. There can never be a just law requiring uniformity of behavior on the abortion issue.

I’m not pro abortion but pro *choice*. There is something vicious and violent about coercing a woman to carry to term an unwanted child. To force the unwanted on the unwilling, to use a woman’s body against her will and choice, is morally repugnant.

I place these thoughts about abortion in my sermon about Jesus debating Kerry and Bush because it is pivotally tied to the issues of poverty.

Our friend Glen Stassen, Professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Seminary and strongly pro life, was surprised when he analyzed the data on abortion. Abortion was declining during the Clinton years. In the decade before George W. Bush became President, abortions declined by 17.4%. When George W. Bush became President, you would expect

abortion to continue going down, even to plunge, given President Bush's anti-abortion promises. Instead the opposite happened. At least 52,000 more abortions occurred in the United States in 2002 alone than should have been the case had the 1990's record of abortion decreases continued.

Dr. Stassen's analysis needs careful reflection. Under George W. Bush the number of abortions increased substantially. To anyone familiar with why most women have abortions, this would be no surprise. Two-thirds of women who have abortions cite inability to afford a child as their primary reason. Job losses and decreased average real income have added to the serious impact.

Over the last three years, 5.2 Million lost their health insurance and women of childbearing age are over-represented in those 5.2 million. Abortions increased because many more prospective mothers cannot afford the costs of hospital and of caring for a child.

Economic policy and abortion are not separate issues; they form one moral imperative.

If Jesus entered this debate, I think these words might come from his lips: "Shame on all those conservative politicians in the nation's Congress and in State Legislatures who have for years so proudly proclaimed their love for children when they were only fetuses—but ignored their needs after they were born."

Yes, yes Jesus admonishes us. "It is the cruelest irony how so many of these anti-abortion politicians have no interest in the things that make a newborn child healthy and beautiful. It violates every standard of decency to force a poor woman to have a child, and then deny her good prenatal care."

All of this needs to be part of our thinking on November 2nd. Conservative politicians with the blessing of the Religious Right have strongly advocated the dismantling of social programs that provide a decent life for children once they enter this world. The ultimate test of a society is the kind of world it creates for its children. And what we have allowed to happen to children in America is a moral scandal and breaks the heart of God. No matter what rhetoric is used, any public policy that makes a child's life more miserable is an abomination before God.

On November 2nd vote all your values. Bring a sensitive conscience to that ballot box.

III

Now a final comment. We are humbled by the challenge of being faithful to God amid all the complexities and demands that are placed before us. Some of you will say, "I have so little to offer against the hugeness of the issues confronting us." Feeling that way myself sometimes, I go back to some words spoken by Senator Bobby Kennedy in South Africa in 1966. They have always inspired me.

“Let no one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world’s ills, against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence.... Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of our generation.”

Hold on to hope that your life and witness count. Hope will make a tremendous difference in the tasks you assume for yourself. Cynicism and despair are deathblows to any movement for national renewal and world peace, or just your trying to survive the challenges of daily life. Teilhard de Chardin said, “The world of tomorrow belongs to those who gave it the greatest hope.” I believe that passionately.

Many of us have been working on all of this for a long time. It is a terrible day when we let our defeats and failures beat us down into hopelessness and despair. Dante knew the destruction of the loss of hope, for he placed over the gates of hell the words, “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” Despair is the deathblow to a new and better and more just future. It is unmistakably clear that when we lose our capacity to hope, we lose our capacity to shape our future.

Do you remember those days when your heart was full of hope that life could be different, that life could be transformed and healed, that life could be better and more wonderful? Remember the energy that brought to your life. Those dreams you have for your children and grandchildren, those dreams for your marriage or close relationships, those dreams for your job—they are powerful engines for change in your life. Don’t let anyone take them from you. Nor take from you your dreams for a new America and a peaceful world.

Jesus now speaks to all of us. “I need you to share with me the healing of all life.”

When you go into the voting booth on Tuesday, take with you all that you know about Jesus, the peacemaker. Take all that Jesus means to you. Then vote your deepest values.

Amen.