

The world – or at least this part of it – seems to be full of words at the moment. When I managed to tune out from the endless political wrangling on the news, and tune into the readings for today, three sentences jumped out at me. They were:

Let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action.

By what power or by what name did you do this?

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

If you want to look for people who are showing love in truth and action, maybe doing so during an election campaign isn't the best idea. The whole atmosphere is the antithesis of love. According to 1 Corinthians 13, love isn't arrogant, boastful or rude. It doesn't insist on having things its own way, and it looks for truth. But we are currently beset with people arguing with each other, not listening, shouting each other down, point-scoring and making endless promises. Most of the latter are aimed at one or another group of people who might make their voting decisions on the basis of 'What's in it for me?' Meanwhile an increasing number of people tune out altogether, because it's 'nothing to do with me', or 'they're all the same anyway', or 'they're only in it for themselves'. All of which statements are both worrying and wrong. There are no more rotten apples in politics than in any other profession – though admittedly the rottenness is often more visible.

I can tell you from personal experience that it is very hard work being a candidate. Standing in an election must be the worst way of applying for a job ever devised. About 80% of the candidates won't be successful (and most of them knew that before they started), but they will have spent months, if not years, of their own time and a lot of their own money to get to this point. Even the parties with the biggest moneybags don't reimburse candidates for the personal expenses, unpaid leave, diminished job prospects and family upheavals that fighting an election entail. Yet people still throw themselves into political activity because, fundamentally, they want to make a difference. That is the single aspect in which they are all the same. So, on this Sunday when St John exhorts us to love, let us love our candidates. All of them. We may not like the particular difference that any one candidate would like to make, and we may choose not to vote for them. But they deserve our respect, and they deserve our intelligent participation in the electoral process. Politics is one of the main ways, in a civilised society, that differences are made, and as Christians we have a duty to consider the options and think and pray carefully before casting our votes. We do not show love in action for our fellow citizens by abrogating our civic responsibilities.

But then what? In a couple of weeks' time the next government will be in place. How do we then go on loving in truth and action? By what power and authority will that government act? Our responsibility doesn't end because the election is over. We are charged with helping to build the Kingdom of God, not in some nebulous way in the future, but here and now, in Ealing and Britain and the world. That includes holding our politicians to account from day to day, as well as taking whatever direct action we can in appropriate areas. So yes, support a food bank, a night shelter or a training scheme for unemployed teenagers, but also make sure your MP gets told, regularly and pithily, that a rich and privileged country like ours should not have poverty, homelessness and unemployment. And challenge them as to what they are going to do about it.

One of the most appalling events of the last few days has been the death toll of people trying to cross the Mediterranean to what they see as a better, safer life in Europe. European political leaders have just held a special meeting to decide what to do. They managed to agree to step up the search and rescue effort (though some argued that this will simply encourage more people to risk the journey). There is some support for destroying the boats, as a way to reduce the number of people who embark. But none of our leaders is willing to tackle the causes of the problem, and until they do, the situation won't change. People in Africa and parts of the Middle East are fleeing from intolerable conditions. Nobody willingly scrapes money together, leaves their home, pays thousands of pounds to shady contact people and corrupt boat-owners, and endures gruesome conditions and a perilous journey unless they can see no other alternative. These people are trying to escape war, religious or racial persecution and unimaginable poverty. Many have been driven off their land because their governments have sold it to huge international companies who produce food crops for export to Europe, the US and China or – even worse – who grow cane and jatropha and oil palm to be converted to biodiesel so that we can continue to drive around under the impression that we are being environmentally friendly. Our trade and foreign policy arrangements do nothing to change this.

Nor were any of our leaders willing to tackle the problem of what to do with the immigrants once they've arrived. Sending them back isn't an option – experience already shows that most of them will simply try again. But nobody would agree, even in principle, to distributing them across Europe, let alone discussing what a reasonable distribution might be. Yet we in Europe are some of the wealthiest, most privileged people in the world. Our civilisation is predominantly Christian, so we can all see that St John asks us how anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need can refuse to help. Europeans are rich because we have exploited the world's goods for so long. Back in the 1970s, when Idi Amin threw the Asians out of Uganda, thousands of British households opened their doors to the refugees. Individual families extended hospitality to individual families. Have we become so selfish, so xenophobic and so fearful of difference that we can't now organise something similar? Are our own personal living standards so sacred that we can't find a way to share? Can't we see that these people are our brothers and sisters in need? Wouldn't this be a way of building understanding and community, instead of corralling those who do make it into detention centres and holding camps? Isn't this what a tiny bit of the Kingdom of God might look like?

There are well over three thousand would-be parliamentarians out there for the next few days. Could this be a perfect time to make them listen?