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Wednesday November 12, 2014

The real test of democracy

On a typical day, I shower in municipal water. I flush my wastes into a municipal system – or I would, if the municipal system ever reaches the rural area where I live. I drive to town on municipal roads. I buy products and services from municipally licenced businesses. I spent most of the day in a house on which I pay municipal taxes.

What Ottawa does with its CF-18 fighters, its regulatory agencies, its international trade agreements, seems very far away.

And yet roughly twice as many people make the effort to vote in federal elections than in municipal ones. Federal elections average a 60 per cent turnout. In the 2011 municipal election, only three B.C. cities managed to top 30 per cent.

Why? Wouldn't you expect immediate concerns to take priority over distant ones?

Is it complacency – the universe is unfolding as it should? Is it apathy – the belief you can't fight city hall?

A different definition

Most definitions of democracy focus on having the right to vote. I think that's only a partial definition.

Hong Kong has the right to vote. But not for candidates chosen by the voters. Only for candidates chosen by another level of government.

Egypt has the right to vote. But if they elect the "wrong" person, a combination of mass protests and military intervention can overrule that vote.

Although almost every country in the world now has some form of voting, it's not necessarily a right. I was surprised to learn, for example, that

the U.S. Constitution does not specifically include the right to vote. Which puts it in company with Iran, Libya, and Singapore.

Many countries also exclude large proportions of their residents. Saudi Arabia does not allow women to vote at all. Nor does the Vatican, that country within another country. When it votes to elect a new pope, only cardinals may vote. None of whom, under canon law, can be female.

To me, the crucial characteristic of a democracy is not the right to vote someone *into* office, but the right to vote them *out*. After all, Hitler and Stalin were both elected to start.

Addicted to power

The first thing that all dictators do is revise constitutions, alter regulations, and manipulate voting processes to ensure that they cannot be voted out of office. As George Orwell once wrote, “Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship...The object of power is power.”

Unfortunately, ballots never include a box for voting against a candidate. The alternative is to vote for a different candidate who will, you hope, turn out closer to what you expected.

Despite campaign promises and policy platforms, no one ever knows how a candidate will act after getting elected. So you always vote for an unknown quantity, what my mother used to call “a pig in a poke.” And some of those elected do turn out to be pigs.

But there is a solution. This Saturday, residents of B.C. communities get a chance to turf out some pigs, and to replace them with preferred choices. This is democracy at work.

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YOUR TURN

Last week’s column was a bit of a rant, I admit. But I do get fed up with people who claim to represent Christ, and then go in opposite directions from where I think Christ would want. Meanwhile a gullible public seems to accept that anyone who speaks “in the name of Christ” must be speaking absolute truth.

Jim Henderschedt shares that view. He sent a one word response: “Amen”.

Don Schau agreed too: “You are spot on with your column this week. There are to my knowledge absolutely no biblical references that associate Jesus with advocating violence. The one exception that some people will raise is the cleansing of the temple, but current analysis says that is an incorrect interpretation. Even for those who disagree with this analysis, I would certainly allow Jesus one lapse in judgement (if that is how they would need to look at it) given he was in the last week of his life and knew it.

“For what it’s worth, I think this ‘prophet’ is also off-base in her understanding of evil, but that is probably a discussion for another day.”

Steve Roney took a different view: “Come on, Jim! Surely you’ve read the Book of Revelation? This is entirely in that style, and consistent with it in tone.”

Steve is right about the tone of Revelation. But it raises for me the question of whether the early church “fathers” made a mistake in including Revelation in the New Testament canon.

Jim McKean wrote: “Thanks for pointing out that there are other terrorists other than Islamists.

“Currently we are having a holiday in Florida. Your column came just after experiencing our first mid-term election in the United States.

Unfortunately Linda Newkirk represents a growing sector of a society that sees Armageddon around every corner. It is somewhat understandable that this sector is growing as all the political advertisements were full of negative thoughts and ideas. Neither party was speaking to the issues at hand, but simply lambasted the opposition. Does this sound familiar?

“The night after the election one television channel ran a filler which showed a lovely quiet beach with waves breaking. Over top of the scene appeared the following ‘No more election ads. Enjoy the quiet!’

“As I write this I wonder if Linda Newkirk and others might find the true peace of Christ if they only bought into Universal Medicare?”

Chris Duxbury in Australia mused on that Armageddon fixation: “I have heard different versions of this over the years. Of a God who brings suffering to a nation because of their wickedness. Tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, disease, you name it, have all been seen as an angry God giving judgment to a nation.

We live in a time where we now know why these atrocities happen. There is no reason why we should label the source as God. We have a different world view than the many writers of the Bible, who were limited to their culture and time. So, those who hold these twisted theologies need to think about what God they do follow and believe. For me, it is a God of love who walks with us, who cries as nations hurt, and who forever calls us to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with the Lord.”

Margaret McLachlan thought that the prophet “is mentally ill, and most people reading her article who are so-called normal will twig into her condition. But there are many who will not, so your article was well said.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Anyone who feels excluded, shut out, treated as inferior, might sympathize with the yearning expressed in Psalm 123.

1 I wish I were like you.

**You have so much more than we have;
you are so much more than we are.**

**2 You are the norm, the model, the image everyone expects of us.
We discern you at a distance, as through the wrong end of a telescope.
You are far out of reach, untouchable.**

3 Don't ignore us, please.

We have had more than our share of contempt dumped on us.

4 For too long, we have been the rejects, the people nobody cares about.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use

to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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