The people have spoken!

The unpredictability of the Election Result illustrates that the mysterious workings of democracy, like the mysterious purposes of God, have a great power to surprise us.

But do these two forces of surprise have anything much in common?

From our starting point of today’s reading from John’s Gospel we cannot avoid observing that its themes of faith, prayer, servanthood and obedience to the great command of Jesus “Love each other” – were conspicuously absent from the election campaign.

Perhaps the problem here is that in today’s secular society there is huge reluctance to bring God into politics.

In this context you may enjoy the story about a 1960’s Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas Home, who in his quiet way was a committed Evangelical Christian.

On hearing this information a certain charismatic lady, somehow managed to buttonhole the Prime Minister at a reception.

“Is it true you have been saved Sir Alec”, she demanded, “Have you been saved?”

Realising that he was cornered, Sir Alec nervously whispered, “Well er …. Yes, I think I have been saved”.

“Hallelujah!” cried the exuberant lady, “but why then are you not proclaiming your salvation from the rooftops?”

“Because Madam”, murmured Sir Alec, “In my case it was such a close run thing that I thought I had better keep quiet about it”.

\*\*\*

“Better keep quiet about it” or “we don’t do God” may be the prevailing fashion for faith in politics but it is not the whole story or indeed the right story.

Because as we prepare for a new Parliament we know that there are plenty of good and Godly people in the front line of politics from all parties who are inspired by their faith.

There are important issues and causes in contemporary politics which are hugely influenced by faith.

But for all these signposts of faith is there nowadays any direct linkage between the life of prayer and the life of politics?

\*\*\*

In the life of the Church, today is the 6th and last Sunday of Easter. It marks the end of our celebration of the joy and hope of the resurrection.

In this season believers often pray for personal resurrection and new beginnings in our own lives.

New Parliaments, like new Presidential inaugurations in the United States can also herald the expectation of the new hopes and new beginnings.

The Prime Minister was more or less telling us this when he declared outside Downing Street that he believed that we are “on the brink of something special in our own country”.

It is all too easy to be cynical about such aspirations but there are also powerful antidotes to such cynicism both in recent political history and in examples today here in our own faith community of HTB.

Let’s start on an historical note as we are this weekend celebrating the 70th anniversary of VE day – celebrating the victory that gave us the freedom to hold Parliamentary elections.

The hero of that hour was the Prime Minister Winston Churchill, cheered to the skies. But only a few weeks later a new Parliament was elected with a most surprising result. As Mr Churchill rather grumpily put it in his memoirs:

“No sooner had the victory celebrations finished than the British people dismissed me from all conduct of their affairs”.

What is interesting in the context of our reading today is to remember how many key members of that great incoming and reforming Labour Government were inspired by the teachings of the Gospels.

That was certainly true of the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, with his long experience of Christian voluntary service at Toynbee Hall, working among the poor of the East End.

It was true of the Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir Stafford Cripps, a strong believer.

It was true of many other members of Attlee’s Cabinet. They included incidentally my wife Elizabeth’s father Lord Ogmore whose Welsh Baptist faith was the cornerstone of his public service.

That cornerstone of faith, shared by many MPs elected in 1945, had a great deal to do with the Attlee Government’s crowning achievement – the creation of the NHS.

Prime Minister Attlee and his colleagues fought the good fight against fierce opposition to create the NHS because of their moral sense of purpose.

They were determined to lift from the shoulders of millions of their fellow citizens the fear of not being able to afford private medical care.

So the majority Government in the 1945 Parliament did what they passionately believed to be right (and what everyone now knows to be right) because they stood by their principles which surely included the principle of obedience to the command of Jesus in our reading today, “See that you love one another”.

This historical example is relevant to the situation now. Today we still need - as the new Parliament opens – MPs who will be guided by faith-based principles, convictions and standards.

So my first answer to the rhetorical question in the title of this talk “What now should we pray for?” is to suggest that we pray for the Members of the new Parliament, collectively and individually.

As you can imagine it’s a thrilling moment for a newly elected Member of Parliament to take his or her seat in the House of Commons for the first time.

This happened to me all bright eyed and bushy tailed with a mixture of personal ambition and public service back in the dark ages of February 1974, amidst chaotic scenes of a miner’s strike, a hung parliament and a minority government.

Even though we have avoided such difficulties after this election there are still some fragile problems today.

One of them is the problem of trust.

Trust between parties within Parliament. Trust between MPs and the public outside Parliament.

I worry as many do that the public trust in which Parliamentarians are held seem to be at a low ebb following the expenses and other scandals.

Perhaps my worries are all the sharper because I fear I may have contributed to this poor reputation by my own failings as an MP.

So, of course, we need to pray for a predictable list of qualities in our MPs such as integrity, character, wisdom and discernment.

But perhaps more surprisingly please also pray for all our Parliamentarians to stay humble.

Avoiding the aura of arrogance than can accompany election to Parliament is more difficult than it looks.

MPs can be particularly vulnerable to the sin of pride, and the higher they rise the easier it is to fall at least in the eyes of our judgemental media.

Being locally lionised in one’s constituency with the new status of “Our Member” can go to one’s head.

If you rise to the Cabinet all that “Yes Minister” flapdoodle (if anything understated by the TV series) also goes to your head. You begin to think you can walk on water or that the usual rules do not apply to you.

So as our MPs walk into the Palace of Westminster for the first time, please pray that they can be protected against the sin of egotistical pride and blessed by the gift of humility.

There is no better verse from the Bible on this than Micah 6:8:

 “What does the Lord require of you?

 To act justly, to love mercy

 And to walk humbly before God”.

\*\*\*

After praying for individual Members of Parliament, are there any individual policies to pray for?

Here there needs to be a note of caution – the same note of caution struck by Jesus when the Pharisees showed him a coin with Caesar’s head on it and tried to trick him with a question on Roman taxation. He replied, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and render unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21).

As our new MPs will discover much of the day to day work of the things that are Caesar’s ie the daily grind of Parliamentary business is extremely boring and almost entirely secular. The House of Commons spends its days on dreary matters such as:

Debating statutory instruments on axle weights for heavy lorries.

Scrutinising police budgets or the small print of excise duties in the finance bill.

It all seems a long way from the purposes of God and pious Politicians on both sides of the Atlantic are usually unwise to claim they have holy hotlines to Heaven.

I have always had a sneaking sympathy for Benjamin Disraeli who became so irritated by the religiosity his devout rival Mr W E Gladstone applied to every subject that Dizzy joked:

“I can handle Gladstone claiming to have the Ace of Trumps up his sleeve. But I can’t bear his pretence that God put it there”.

Behind the jest, the point here is that MPs or even Prime Ministers are surprisingly impotent, perhaps particularly in a time of slender majorities.

As Dr Samuel Johnson wrote almost 300 years ago:

“Of all the ills that human hearts endure

How small the ones that Kings or laws can cure”.

Or as Tom Wright wrote in his commentary *John for Everyone* on the vital verses of our Reading today.

“You can’t legislate for love … discovering the difference between what the law can achieve and what God can and does achieve is one of the great arts of being human and being Christian”.

Yet that said it remains an historical and spiritual fact that God sometimes does achieve his mysterious purposes through Parliamentarians.

Think William Wilberforce.

And on our contemporary scene let me come close to home and give two up to date examples of why we should be encouraged to try to exercise Parliamentary influence through prayer and ministry right here at HTB.

One of the most remarkable achievements in the closing weeks of the last Parliament was the passing of the Modern Slavery Act, which received the Royal Assent on March 15. It is a new law cracking down on the vile trade in the human trafficking of women and girls into prostitution.

The campaign for this excellent but unexpected reform originated from a small group of nine young men who were HTB regulars and prayer group members.

The magnificent nine, as they deserve to be called, included

**Harry, Sam and Edward Lawson Johnston**

**George Haddo**

**Oliver Scutt**

**Charlie Hart**

**Ben Grizzle**

**Jonathan Pugh Smith**

**Cameron Young**

Some of you will know them and their families well.

They were inspired, partly by a talk they heard at HTB in 2009, to research, work, study and pray about the practicalities of how to prevent human trafficking.

When they were on fire with their reforming zeal they took advice from members of the HTB congregation who guided them to the appropriately named Christian Guy who is heads The Centre for Social Justice think tank.

Helped by energetic fundraising by the magnificent 9, The Centre for Social Justice produced a detailed blockbuster of a report on a how to prevent trafficking by a new law. This was presented to the Home Secretary, Theresa May, herself a lady of faith.

She then fought against the familiar obstacles of opposition and inertia to drive the Modern Slavery Bill through all its Parliamentary stages.

She was greatly assisted by cross party support organised by the Labour MP Frank Field – yet another committed believer.

The point to emphasise is that this Bill would never have reached the Statute Book without the inspiration and motivation of faith in the lives of most of the key players - starting right here at HTB.

I hold it up to you as a marvellous example of how Christian action and prayer can influence public life today.

Coming even more up to date – to be precise tomorrow night - let me mention the work of HTB’s charity Caring for Ex-Offenders, which is led by Paul Cowley.

By its work and conferences in recent years CFEO has set the agenda for the shift in criminal justice policy towards rehabilitation.

Tomorrow evening as an important step on this road CFEO is holding a big event at St Augustine’s which we have called *Mentoring – A Call to Action*. The purpose of the evening is to recruit mentors for offenders. Anyone who is interested in being a mentor, learning about mentoring please come along.

A note giving the details of the evening will be handed out by the Operations Manager of CFEO, a member of this congregation, Sophie Giles at the end of our service.

This work of CFEO is just another example of how the words of Jesus, “I was in prison and you came to visit me”. (Matthew 25:26) can be lifted into contemporary political action by people of faith.

\*\*\*

After that commercial for the CFEO evening tomorrow let’s end by lifting our eyes up to the one who is really in charge.

Back in the 15th century there was a story about an historic meeting between the two giants of religion of that age Luther and Erasmus. After their conversation had been going a while, Erasmus unexpectedly chided his companion (I paraphrase).

“The trouble with you Luther is that your thoughts on God are far too small.”

I’m afraid that my thoughts too have been far too small this morning.

Talking about elections, think tanks, bills, the pride of MPs and all the petty paraphernalia of politics is small beer when you stop to realise that all political power is borrowed power.

As our own Graham Tomlin wrote in the *Credo* column of the Times last week on the subject of political leaders:

“They will one day give account for how they used the power they were given and that they are truly accountable not just to the whim of the people but to someone or something bigger, deeper and more final – the God who has laid the foundations of justice, mercy and peace beneath the torrents of human pride and desire”.

So as we close, let’s ponder for a moment on that someone or something that is bigger deeper and more final than anything to do with Parliament or politics.

Just harken to these majestic words on the God of Eternity opening verses of Psalm 90.

Lord you have been our refuge

Throughout all generations

Before the mountains were born

Or you brought forth the earth and the world

From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

These words which inspired the hymn *O God our Help in Ages Past* lift us out of the time zones and beyond the horizons of Parliaments and Governments.

Politicians, being creatures of time, have very little understanding of the concept of eternity.

And yet there are eternal values which should influence Governments and Parliaments.

Remember these great words of Scripture which we have already heard mentioned or read to us this morning.

“Love each other”.

“Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly before God”

 “Care for the least of these your brethren”

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you”

And one particular command of Jesus relevant to our present situation is his plea for unity in John 17. “May all of them be one just as you and I Father are one … May they be brought to complete unity”.

That might sound a big political ask after a fractious election campaign. But the new Parliament faces momentous challenges.

For example on Britain’s future relationship with Europe and on what may be a new constitutional framework enabling the nations in this United Kingdom to live together in harmony.

Such great issues can only be resolved by Parliament debating and legislating in a spirit of unity.

If anyone wanted an awesome glimpse of the power that comes from unity they should have been in the Albert Hall on Tuesday morning at the HTB Leadership conference.

On stage, participating in a joint interview with Nicky Gumbel was the leader of this country’s Catholics, Cardinal Vincent Nichols and the leader of this country’s Anglicans, The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.

After centuries of fighting and feuding between these two churches it was inspirational to hear these contemporary leaders saying how they trusted one another instinctively.

How they shared a common purpose, and

How they wanted to serve God in unity.

I am sure that I was not the only person in that 5,000 strong audience who was deeply moved to the point of wondering if the shining example of unity from our religious leaders might spread into the hearts of our political leaders.

So when in a moment Ed leads us in prayer, let us pray:

For unity;

For humility;

For visionary policies;

And for eternal values to guide our new Parliament.

**Amen**