



## Who should you vote for?

Ten days ago, the chief rabbi didn't quite tell people not to vote Labour, but he did say that you have to "vote with your conscience" and he made clear that "Labour's attempts to deal with anti-Jewish racism is incompatible with British values"; most fair minded people interpreted his remarks thus: that a true inquisition into one's conscience would lead one not to vote Labour.

As a priest, I have wrestled with the issue of pitching into the General Election. Normally I like to 'preach into' the conversation people are having. That's where the meatiest sermons lie, because people are inherently interested in your starting point, so a General Election sermon is a no-brainer, and it's a sermon without a punchline if you don't nail your colours to the mast.

At the same time, to have the opportunity to preach is an extraordinary privilege. The congregation may come up to me individually afterwards, but they don't get a public 'right of reply' opportunity. Any preacher has to be aware that their particular position means the view comes without an opponent to offer balance. And, in my case (and I'd guess this is true of most congregations) I know of people actively involved with Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Greens. If I came down publicly on one side or other, someone would be unhappy.

In itself, however, I don't think that's a reason not to preach on this one. You've got to be true to your un-

derstanding of what God calls you to say. In retrospect, no one criticises Bonhoeffer for preaching against Hitler, or Desmond Tutu for preaching against President De Klerk. They interpreted that calling out the government of the time for racist violence was the right thing to do, and they were right.

The situation here is far less stark. You could make a moral case for voting for any of the major parties, and it depends on which moral criteria you use: nobody is going to vote for Boris Johnson if they want a leader who exhibits family values; nobody is going to vote for Jeremy Corbyn if they want a leader who is a good monarchist, but those who like family values may feel that other concerns trump that, and still vote Tory; ditto with Labour and the monarchy, or whatever.

But the crux of it is that it's a hypothetical problem. However much I might wrestle with what the right thing would be to preach, a sermon telling people who to vote for just wouldn't work; at least, it wouldn't work here and now. Maybe there was a time in 1950s England when congregations dutifully did as they were told (though I doubt it), but I don't think there is a single person alive today in Surbiton, Christian or otherwise, who would mark their ballot paper according to how the vicar had instructed them.

Pushing out a party political message would, therefore, be fruitless. And perhaps that awareness of the C of E's own lack of power is healthy.

*Dec 2019 Thought for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at [www.surbitonchurch.org.uk](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*