

Truth in Love Today

Part One: How Christians Should Think About and Engage in Politics

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This morning we begin a new five-part series that is rooted in and woven through our larger series on Ephesians

We're calling it *Truth in Love Today*, and in these five messages we'll be addressing some of the current cultural issues that cause us so much weariness as followers of Jesus: Artificial Intelligence, phones and social media, divisions within evangelicalism, how to relate to outsiders . . . and this morning – I thought I'd start with one of the easier ones first – we're talking about politics. How should Christians think about and engage in politics?

Do you remember that wonderful moment in *The Lord of the Rings* when Gandalf, Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas arrive at the Golden Hall in Rohan to see King Theoden?



The Doorward stops them at the gate and insists that they hand over their weapons before they enter the hall. So Gimli, Aragorn, and Legolas start to unbuckle and hand over all of their weapons, one after another: swords, bows, arrows, daggers.

As we begin our way into a conversation on one of the most charged issues of our day, this is where I'd like us all to begin: by laying down our weapons and approaching this as a conversation between friends who trust each other and who love each other and who together are seeking to place ourselves under God's rule in this area of our lives.

Let's lay down our defensiveness, let's set aside our readiness to take offense, and let's open our hearts together to how God may want to speak to us this morning.

Specifically, I'd like to invite us to follow the example of the Bereans in Acts 17, who, we're told, received Paul's teaching with open arms, and then went home and studied the Scriptures to see if what Paul taught them was true.

It doesn't matter much what I think about all this. But it matters a lot what God thinks about all of this. So let's open our hearts to him and to his word and to one another, seeking to listen in that posture that James invites us to, when he says

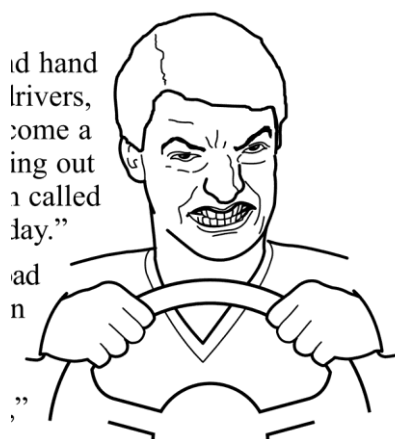
James 3.17-18

The wisdom that comes from heaven [isn't combative or argumentative – it] is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

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So why is it that we have such difficulty talking about politics without spitting and sputtering and turning red and getting incensed?

Do any you recognize this guy?



If you've gotten your driver's license in Indiana anytime since the mid-90s you probably do. "Road Rage Guy," as he's known on the internet, makes an appearance in the Indiana Driver's Manual. My son Sean liked this guy so much I had a t-shirt made for him with his picture on it.

So . . . why is it that, when we talk about politics, we can so quickly begin to look like Road Rage Guy?

We're going to talk about a few other reasons later, but let me mention a big one now. Think how wide the scope of politics is. Think how deep its reach is. Think of all the parts of our lives it touches.

How much money I have – depending on taxes and tariffs and how the economy is doing. What I learn in school. The moral choices I am free to make. The freedom I have to worship. Whether or not a bomb gets dropped on my head. What kind of care I have when I get sick. Whether or not or I am free to travel to another country.

It makes sense that we would get passionate about politics, because none of those are small things.

It isn't hard to become convinced that our wellbeing is directly connected to all those decisions that are being made in Washington. So politics can elicit responses of vulnerability and anxiety and fear and anger and mistrust and a desire to get power and control outcomes.

Often, the more passionately we feel about something, the harder it is to keep calm about it – especially when we run into someone whose feelings are different from our own, which can leave us feeling threatened and defensive. So how do we find a path that brings our passions and our convictions together?

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I won't be focusing this morning on how we should see specific political issues or candidates – what a Christian view is, say, on gun control or race relations or immigration or the economy – instead I'll be looking at the thing behind the thing. how we think about politics and our part in it in general.

This is obviously a massive topic. This morning I'll be exploring four questions in fairly general terms from a biblical perspective:

1. what politics is, and what we can expect it to do
2. what politics is not, and what we cannot expect it to do
3. how Christians are invited to take part in politics and government
4. the way Christians are to conduct themselves as we involve ourselves in politics

And then on Wednesday night we'll be continuing the discussion. Jesse Crossans, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Purdue and a part of our church family – you might recognize him as a member of our worship team from time to time – will be sharing his perspective on some of these issues, and then we'll have an open discussion and Q and A time. That will be here on Wednesday night at 7. I hope you can join us as we continue the conversation.

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The Crucial Starting Point

I think the right place for us to begin our discussion is with the passage we read last week in our Ephesians series. It describes in incredible sweeping terms the plan that God is carrying out in human history, bringing order into our disordered and broken world.

Since that's what politics is about – bringing meaningful order to our life together – it's important that we begin with God's his loving purposes, and anchor ourselves in those.

Here's what we discover. The highest power of the land is not found at the intersection of Pennsylvania Avenue and 15th Street in Washington DC, or the corner of West Chang'an Avenue and Fuyou Street in Beijing, or at the corner of Mokhovaya Street and Borovitskaya Square in Moscow, or anywhere else on this planet.

It is found at the intersection of the *immissa* and the *patibulum*, the vertical post and a horizontal cross beam, on which Jesus of Nazareth, the king of kings, died for us. Paul says:

Ephesians 1.17, 19-23

The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father . . . raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.

Scripture teaches us that Jesus is the king, and through him God is doing nothing less than bringing about a new society and a new humanity.

As Daniel Williams says in his wonderful book *The Politics of the Cross*, God has already established a political order – not to be confused with any existing this-world order, including that of the United States or any other nation-state on this planet. It is called the Kingdom of God.

And those of us who have given him our allegiance – we are subjects to the king and we are citizens of his Kingdom.

Philippians 3.20-21

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform [us].

Ever since his death and resurrection, when Jesus established his kingdom, it has been spreading from heart to heart, as men and women and young people give their lives over to

him as King. And one day the King will return and consummate his kingdom, and all things will be brought under his rule once and for all.

* * *

So then how do we think about politics as we wait for his return?

Here is a rough working description that I came up with that I think captures what the Bible both teaches directly and implies indirectly about politics.

Politics is

- a God-given provisional means
- to bring a measure of order and a measure of justice and a measure of peace
- during this present age
- to a part of our world made up of fallen and fallible citizens, and led by fallen and fallible political leaders
- until Jesus returns and consummates his kingdom once and for all.

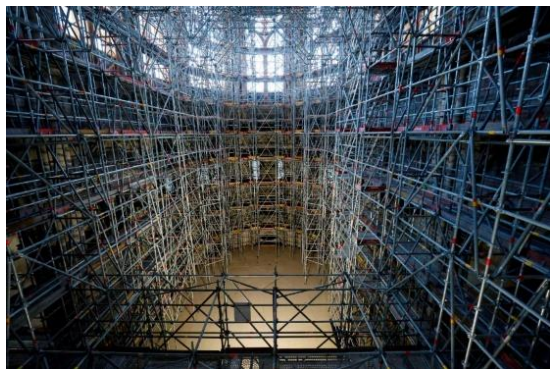
Or boiled down even more, politics is a God-given way to bring a measure of order until Jesus returns and puts all things right. That fits well with what Paul wrote in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Romans about the responsibility of government to its citizens and vice versa:

Romans 13.1-7

The one in authority is God's servant for your good . . . Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities . . . This is also why you pay taxes . . . Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

I think the first sentence in the preamble of the US Constitution does a great job of summing up what this interim sort of political arrangement entails. It spells out five reasons for government and politics in this in-between time: to establish justice, maintain societal stability, provide for national defense, facilitate general economic wellbeing, and protect human freedoms

So seen from the long view of redemptive history, the government isn't a permanent building. The government is more like a scaffold.



It's a temporary structure that brings a measure of stability while the permanent structure is being built – but not by us from the inside, it's being built by God from the outside.

We are absolutely called to use political means to do good and seek justice and try to put things right while we wait. We are not called to simply bide our time. *But* our efforts to do those things do not *establish* the kingdom of God here on earth. They cannot.

In John 18.36 Jesus said,

My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight [to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders]. But my Kingdom is not of this world.

We don't bring about the kingdom. But for those of us who are followers of Jesus, our involvement in politics can and should *reflect* and *anticipate* the Kingdom of God.

In *The Politics of the Cross*, Daniel Williams says:

What is the purpose of Christian engagement in the political system? Is it to save our nation from immorality? Is it to protect the rights of Christians? . . . While these goals ... have commonly guided American white evangelical political participation for the past few decades . . . they fall short.

The cross gives a radically different rationale for Christian political participation. . . . Our task is simply to reveal God's kingdom to others. . . .

If the sovereign king of God's kingdom declared that the second greatest commandment ... was to love our neighbor as ourselves, then we can safely assume that one of the central ways that we can reveal God's kingdom to others through politics is to vote in such a way that shows the maximum amount of love for our neighbors, even if that means voting against our own self-interest. 7-8

So politics is a way of bringing order in the interim, not bringing about God's kingdom, but pointing to it, anticipating it, as God establishes and spreads his kingdom now – not law by law or agency by agency but transformed heart by transformed heart.

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So if that's what politics is, then what is it not?

Clearly, the easiest temptation for us to fall into is to mistake what we are building for what God is building. To see our government and our political efforts as something that is ultimate and lasting. But it isn't.

Scaffolds are great temporary work structures, but they make for lousy homes.

And when we do that, when we mistake the scaffold for the permanent structure, it is easy to look to this thing that we are building as the thing that determines our ultimate wellbeing. But it can't.

They were never made to bear the weight of all our hopes and fears and expectations and desires for life.

Earlier this week I was on a walk at the Celery Bog when a field sparrow flew past me and landed on a tall, slender, piece of Indian grass. Slowly, as I watched, that long stem began to droop, and then bend over, and then finally collapse under the weight of that little bird.

Government can provide for a modicum of order and a provisional peace while we await the return of Jesus the King, but ultimate peace and security and wellbeing – those are not things our government can provide.

It is not possible to use political means to find a way back through the closed door on the East side of the Garden of Eden, to make of a nation or a society a new version of the perfect order that lay on the other side.

There is no way we can legislate this nation, or any nation, into "being good" or "being godly." The only way to reform society is to share Jesus and let him change hearts one at a time, not to pass laws imposing moral standards. It's still right to pass laws that uphold moral boundaries, but not to trust them to bring about anything in the way of heart change.

Implied in what I've just shared is what I believe is a bedrock temptation to give politics an disproportionate place in our hopes.

Because of all the significant arenas of our lives that are touched by political decisions, we can slide into believing that our ultimate wellbeing is in the hands of our elected officials and the decisions they make and the laws they pass and the agencies they establish.

And that can lead us to inflate the importance of who is in office and what decisions they are making.

Our government is important, our constitution is important, our laws are important . . . but we can forget that they are not ultimately important. Just ask any faithful follower of Jesus living in China, or Iran, or Nepal, right now. Or living in the Roman Empire during the early years of the church.

Are there challenges? Sure, some very significant challenges. Are there ultimate challenges? No. God has me. He holds my life. He provides for my every need. Regardless of the political context in which I live.

Biblically speaking, when we inflate the importance of politics, we can fall into one of two mistakes.

One is the mistake of getting distracted by politics, and taking our eyes off of God as the one who alone ensures our personal wellbeing. That's what the Bible calls foolishness, or folly.

Foolishness always has a very specific meaning in the Bible. It means looking out on the world in a way that leaves God out of his rightful place at the center of things. Folly is contrasted in the Book of Proverbs with walking in *wisdom*.

For example, Proverbs 29.25-26 speaks of the foolishness of looking to our earthly leaders to secure our wellbeing instead of trusting the Lord.

And Psalm 118.9 says

It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

The other mistake we can make goes even further. It is the mistake of letting politics take God's place, looking to it to be for us and do for us what only God can be or do. Establish our identity. Give us security. Give us control. Safeguard our future. Give us peace.

Leaving God out of the center – folly – is one thing. Looking to something else to take God's place there is another. That's what the Bible calls *idolatry*.

John addresses the temptation to idolatry in I John 5.21 when he writes:

Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.

As John of the Cross says, idolatry can lead us to rejoice in the wrong things, to put our hope in the wrong places, to feel sorrow over the wrong circumstances, and to fear the wrong people.

Don't you think that helps explain why there is so much tension connected to politics, because we invest it with such disproportionate meaning and fix our hearts and our hopes on it? Isn't that a significant reason for all the political road rage?

In the Book of Isaiah, God lovingly confronts the idolatry of his people when they look for a political solution to issues that are ultimately not political problems. They turn to the government of Egypt, believing wrongly that their wellbeing and security can be come from a flawed human institution led by flawed human leaders, rather than turning to God.

He says in Isaiah 30 and 31:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
 who rely on horses,
 who trust in the multitude of their chariots
 and in the great strength of their horsemen,
 [horses and chariots refer to military strength]
 but do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
 or seek help from the Lord. (Isaiah 31.1)

The Egyptians are mere mortals and not God;
 their horses are flesh and not spirit.
 When the Lord stretches out his hand,
 those who help will stumble,
 those who are helped will fall;
 all will perish together. (Isaiah 31.3)

This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:
 In repentance and rest is your salvation,
 in quietness and trust is your strength. (Isaiah 30.15)

You may be aware that the word repentance just means "return" – not just turn around, but turn around and go back. Return home.

After exposing the folly and idolatry of looking to temporal structures for ultimate things, God spells out the necessary antidote: repentance. Owning our folly and admitting our idolatry and turning around and going back, returning home, to him – to the One alone in whom rest and quietness and salvation are found. Because, as it says in Isaiah:

The Lord longs to be gracious to you;
 therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.

For the Lord is a God of justice.

Blessed are all who wait for him! (Isaiah 30.18)

So God calls us to let *him* occupy his proper place in the center of things, and to look to him, to trust him, to meet our ultimate needs. As Jesus says in Luke 12.31:

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need.

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How, then, should we engage in politics?

If God doesn't meet our ultimate needs through political means, it would be tempting then to conclude that God doesn't want us to have anything to do with politics. But that wasn't the conviction of the New Testament church.

Last fall I was privileged to visit ancient Corinth with our dear Romanian brother Doru, where we saw this inscription carved into a public square.



It is abbreviated, but it says essentially:

Erastus in his public office paved this square at his own expense

Here's what's cool. Most scholars are agreed that this is the same Erastus who Paul mentions when he writes to the Roman believers from Corinth, and tells them in Romans 16.23 that Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, sends greetings.

Here's a follower of Christ serving in public office, and using both his position and his resources for the good of others.

Two sayings of Jesus have led the church over the centuries to believe that taking part in politics is a legitimate and God-honoring activity for followers of Christ.

One is the passage already mentioned by Daniel Williams – Matthew 22.39 – in which Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as part of the outworking of our love for God. Across the centuries, love of neighbor has been the single most compelling motivator for Christians to get involved politically while we wait for Jesus' return.

The other passage of Scripture that has motivated political participation is when Jesus says in the same chapter in Matthew: "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give back to God what belongs to God." (Matthew 22.21)

The church has by and large concluded, and I think it is a fair conclusion, that in a representative democracy, not only *paying taxes* but *voting in elections*, and *making our opinions known* by writing or calling our elected officials, are faithful ways of giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.

So too is *praying for those who serve us in public office*, as Paul encourages us to do in I Timothy 2.1-2.

Being prayerfully open to a call from God to serve in public office is another way of participating faithfully in politics.

I also think it is a faithful conclusion, drawing on the example of the disciples in Jerusalem when the elected officials told them to be silent and they continued to speak out, that rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's means that, when our voices are not being heard, *participating in peaceful demonstrations* is a faithful way to ensure that they are.

And that, when injustice is being perpetuated by the leaders and the laws of the land, *non-violent acts of civil disobedience* can be faithful and costly ways of demonstrating our allegiance to Jesus above our allegiance to our represented officials.

That was certainly true when Christian believers harbored runaway slaves right in this community when it was illegal in Indiana to do so during the 1850s, and it was true when blacks, and whites in solidarity with them, protested seating restrictions in busses and in restaurants in southern states during the 1950s.

Even though our political structures are flawed, and are temporary, God calls us to work within our structures for the good of our neighbor and for the glory of God.

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Which brings us to the last question I wanted to touch on: that is the manner in which we engage in politics.

It's not enough to say that we should get involved. *How* we do what we do is every bit as important as what we do.

I think as followers of Christ, who see clearly the limits of fallen human reason and fallen human structures, it is crucial that we participate in politics with a **humility and honesty** that befit the circumstances of serving as fallen people in broken structures in a fallen world.

We have to start being honest with each other in three areas. First, we have to be honest in admitting that the Bible does not spell out exactly how we should vote on any specific issue. Not one.

We are blessed to have the Bible, inspired by God and free of error, and we can submit to its authority with confidence. But sometimes evangelicals can mistake a right confidence that we *have* the perfect truth with a wrong confidence that we *understand* the truth perfectly.

Think about this. There's not one political issue where we can point to a single passage and say, "See, right there, it spells it out for us – exactly how we should vote."

Even with an issue as clear as abortion, where there's so much consensus among evangelicals – and rightly so – there isn't a single passage of Scripture that says, "Abortion is wrong."

The reason the church has concluded that abortion is wrong, and worked so hard since Roman times to provide alternatives to abortion that protect the lives of unwanted children, is because they have built an argument by weaving together passages that speak of all life as a gift from God, and other passages that speak of life beginning in the womb, and still other passages that speak of the taking of life as murder, and they have brought those together to make a case against taking the life of an unborn child.

And that's for something as morally clear cut as abortion. When it comes to issues such as providing welfare for the poor or responding to immigrants who want access to our country's prosperity and protections, or determining our role in trying to end a war of greed and aggression, or deciding whether or not citizens should have the right to carry arms to defend themselves, the case only gets more complicated.

The only way any honest follower of Jesus can talk about any political issue is to say, "As best I can see it, this is where I come out on this issue. But I may well be wrong."

All that should lead us to go to one another as brothers and sisters in a posture of profound humility and teachability, and to be eager to learn from one another about how we might best apply the scriptures to the complex issues of our day, rather than to attack each other when we discover that the other person has a view different from our own.

Here's a second place we need to be honest. We have to be able to have the same conversations about our candidates.

Just as there is no perfectly clear biblical position on any issue, so there is no perfectly qualified candidate. Every single candidate is a human being, which means every single candidate has both strengths and shortcomings. The best of them are still fallen, and the worst of them are still made in the image of God.

Unfortunately, the seductive pull of partisanship leads us to be unwilling to admit either that the candidate we voted for has any shortcomings, or that the candidate we voted against has any strengths.

Honesty and humility require that we be able to acknowledge the strengths and the flaws of all candidates, including those we vote for.

And here's the third place we need to be honest with ourselves and with each other. We need to admit that no political party perfectly lines up with biblical values and priorities.

Daniel Williams in *The Politics of the Cross* challenges our simplistic thinking on this. He writes:

Both of America's major political parties are deeply rooted in Christian principles, but both have also distorted Christian teaching and have mixed it with assumptions that are antithetical to the message of the Bible.

It is simply not the case that one party is the moral or godly one, and the other one is the evil and godless one.

Tim Keller wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* titled, "How Do Christians Fit into the Two-Party System? They Don't." In the article, he concludes:

While believers can register under a party affiliation and be active in politics, they should not identify the Christian church or faith with [one] political party as the only Christian one.

So if our reflex is to defend our view, or our party, or our candidate, no matter what, as being the only right and biblical one, then we have a view of politics that is not biblically informed.

Christian engagement in politics requires honesty and humility.

It also requires something else as well, something even costlier, something even rarer in this world. It requires **love, respect, and gentleness** for those with whom we disagree. Paul writes to his pastoral protégé in Titus 3:

Titus 3.1-2

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.

Clear evidence of something broken inside of us as human beings is the double tendency in us, first, to divide the world between those who see clearly and biblically, which is us, and those brilliant few who happen to see things our way, and the rest of the world, who are idiots; and then second, to refuse to give in to the temptation to say as much.

There is an ugly, obstreperous, name-calling, fight-picking, part of every one of us apart from God's gracious touch.

Two weeks ago I was driving up to Chicago on 80/94, and a pick-up truck was driving through traffic. Every time it drove past a car, mine included, the guy in the passenger seat flipped off the person he drove past. Why?!

That's us. That's all of us, unless Jesus lays hold of us.

Paul goes on in his letter to Titus.

Titus 3.3

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

Titus 3.4-7

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

In Christ, the kindness, love, and mercy of God have come crashing into our lives. And Paul insists that, if that encounter is real, we cannot remain the same.

Where once our lives were marked by hatred and harshness and unkindness and self-concern, now we will be known for our love, our gentleness, and our kind regard for others.

People who watch us, including the way we relate in the public square, should be able to draw a straight line from God's love and kindness to ours.

We will be different in this world, holy, distinctive in the way God is distinctive, not as a result of our own effort, trying somehow to become like Jesus, but as a result of the Spirit's saving work in us, as he brings us alive to God and then transforms us from glory to glory into the likeness of Christ.

Think of how Jesus related in the public square: speaking the truth openly to those who questioned him, remaining silent before those who attacked him, refusing to strike back at those who struck him, and forgiving those who wronged him.

It is in just that way that God would have us relate in the public square. When others encounter us, our prayer is that they will experience *him in us*: receiving them in his gentleness and love, relating to them with his honesty and humility.

May God make it so.

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In I Corinthians 11, Paul encourages us to examine ourselves before we share in communion. As we come now to communion, I want to encourage us to take that encouragement to heart. Here's how I'd like us to do that.

First, as we wait to receive the elements, let's invite God to examine our hearts, specifically related to politics.

If during this message God has exposed folly, or idolatry, or pride, or unkindness, or despair that comes from lack of trust, I encourage us to confess those things.

And if God brings to mind something specific that you have said or done in unkindness to someone else, I want to encourage you to call that person before the sun goes down today and ask their forgiveness.

Next, as we eat the bread, let's return home to God and receive afresh God's gift of forgiveness, the reassurance that through his death on the cross we are washed clean from our wrongdoing, forgiven for our guilt, accepted in our shame, and made right with him.

Then, as we take the cup, let's open our hearts to Jesus as King and invite him more and more by his Spirit to form his likeness in us.

And if you are not a follower of Jesus, I encourage you to use this time to consider the things we've talked about, and to reflect on where you've placed your hopes and trust in these uncertain times.

Communion

You are our King, Jesus.