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Voting in Light of Eternity and God's Dream for This World

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One could spend a lot of time sorting through the wit and wisdom of Benjamin Franklin. He had a lot to say about the new American nation and its founding. While he warned of political excesses in many directions, he also spoke of his hope in the potential of the people. He said, "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom."

You are reading this, my friends, on Election Day 2020, after a long and ugly season of campaigning and amidst an obvious and worrying rise in division in our country. What might our Christian faith have to say to us as we enter the voting booth?

First, the Christian faith has long held that God can, and does, work through human governments to achieve Divine ends. Many of the founders of this country believed that a chief goal of its founding was to provide a safe and free place for religious life and worship.

I think we could also point to the many instances over the centuries in which this nation has been pivotal in providing humanitarian assistance, offering political guidance to other nations, welcoming those who have been persecuted in their countries, and joining with the international community in ensuring the rule of law.

Second, as Christians, we are to pray for our leaders and our government, at all levels. St. Paul, or a close follower of his, enjoined us to pray for our leaders, and to take our place within the political order:

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

As we heard recently in the Gospel lesson on a Sunday morning, Our Lord also said that we should “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21)

This does not, of course, mean that the United States is perfect, far from it. Just as God can work through flawed and fallible individuals (thank God!), God can also work through flawed and fallible governmental systems to advance God’s Kingdom of peace, justice, and righteousness in the world.

I would say a foundational question we might take with us into the voting booth is: **Which candidates before us, at all levels, would seem most predisposed to work towards purposes most congruent with God’s dream for this world?** That is a question to pray, to ponder, perhaps to journal with lists, before voting.

Third, the Christian should also enter the voting booth surrounded by thanksgiving. We need to be thankful for the great privilege, earned at such expense by so many, that we have to influence our government and to choose our leaders.

Fourth, our vote, and our allegiance to any nation, also ought to be made in light of eternity and our truest, most lasting, and deepest identity – as

children of God. I have often said that, after the moment of death, it ceases to matter whether one was American, British, French, Russian, Iraqi, or Chinese. What matters is one's relationship with God, and how one has treated other people.

This is not an anti-patriotic statement; far from it. I love this country, and especially what it is called to be. Yet I would say our Christian faith can save us from some of the excesses of out-of-control nationalism and factionalism. It seems to me more and more people are approaching our national political life with a near-religious zeal, a zeal which can easily border on the idolatrous, and which may reflect a growing vacuum of true religious devotion.

Is our political life important, and worth our prayer and participation and sacrifice? Yes, absolutely, and without question. But that political life is also limited and time-constrained, **and** we are people bound for eternity. Perhaps that mindset is among the gifts we can bring into the voting booth.

It would seem that Franklin had a similar vision for the new nation and its reliance upon God and a proper humility, as he stressed to the Constitutional Convention in his address on prayer:

"I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that **God governs in the affairs of men**. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings that 'except the Lord build they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel: We shall be divided by our little partial local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall be become a reproach and a bye word down to future age. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing Governments by Human Wisdom, and leave it to chance, war, and conquest."

I am regularly awed by the amazing good and the deep potential that the passionate, faithful, dedicated people of Immanuel bring, by God's grace, to this community and to our world. I believe we at least aim in our better

moments to be the “virtuous people” who are “capable of freedom” of whom Franklin spoke.

I think our nation desperately needs people like us here at Immanuel, right now. This is not because we all agree on every issue or will vote the same today (I can assure you, from many conversations, that we won't!), but because we hold this vision of God's goodness working through this fragile and precious political and governmental system we have been given, and through our own efforts.

This vision allows us to greet even those with whom we may disagree as brothers and sisters, to assume the very best of intentions on their part, and to trust that they are doing the best they can, unless proven otherwise. It really is possible to believe that God is working with and through us, and calling us, humbly, to work towards a more perfect union.

May God help, and bless, us all.

Afterword: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” (John Adams, October 11, 1798.)