

Art of the possible

Resources for young people

This is a one-off session designed to help teenagers and young adults explore the connection between their faith and politics. It can be completed in around one hour.

You will need: a projector and speakers; one bingo sheet per person (handout 1); a few Bibles; a copy of handout 2; a few envelopes with church and state options inside (handout 3).



Icebreaker – political bingo (10 mins)

Give a copy of political bingo (handout 1a or 1b depending on ages) and a pen to each member of the group.

Each person must find someone in the room who can sign a square on the bingo card – you can only sign another person's card once and can't sign your own.

The winner is the first person to complete a line – horizontally, vertically or diagonally. (If the group is too small to limit the number of signatures to one per person, set an appropriate limit. If you have a large group, you may decide that to win you need more than one row completed).

Discuss:

- What surprised you about the game?
- Do you think that everything on the sheet is political?
- What wouldn't you see as political? Why?

Ask the group to define 'politics' in pairs. Then compare and discuss the definitions they've come up along with the following:

"Affairs of the cities" is the translation of the Greek word *Politiká*

"Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable – the art of the next best" was the definition from Otto von Bismarck, a first Chancellor of Germany in the 19th Century.

"Politics are the actions or activities concerned with achieving and using power in a country or society." – Collins Dictionary Definition



Did Jesus get involved with politics? (15 mins)

Split the group into smaller groups of 3-6 people. Divide the following Bible passages between the groups and ask them to read their passage through together.

Bible verses:

Mark chapter 1: 16-20; 21-28; 29-39; 40-45

Mark chapter 2: 1-12; 13-22; 23-28

Mark chapter 3: 1-6

Discussion questions:

- Is Jesus doing anything in this Bible verse that would have been controversial at the time?
- Does what's happening make Jesus' actions political?
- Can you think of any other stories from Jesus' life that are political?
- Why is it important that Jesus was political?
- What does it mean to follow a God who is concerned with the political?
- What impact does that have on how we live out our own faith?

It doesn't matter if you don't cover every passage – the point is to recognise that much of Jesus' ministry and teaching had political implications.

You may wish to refer to handout 2: Seeing Jesus in Scripture, which outlines how these passages from Mark's Gospel illustrate the political implications behind Jesus' actions.



Watch (5 mins)

The Christians in Politics video 'Jesus and Politics': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRINnIYBI3A>



Church and state (15 mins)

Give each group one envelope with all six 'church and state' cards from handout 3 inside.

Explain that once we recognise that all the world and the way it runs, including politics, belongs to God, it changes how we relate to politics. Since the time of the early church, Christians have been grappling with how they should relate to government.

Tell the groups to open the envelope and take some time to read and discuss the different ways the Church and individual Christians might relate to the state. Which did Jesus do? Which would want to play out in your own life?

As the Churches in this country try to relate to the state, they tend to stay in co-operation with the state, conscious of the compromises needed, and try to voice effective opposition. Are they right to do so? Under what circumstances might we choose an alternative way of relating to the state?



Challenge – Meet Your MP (5 mins)

Instead of washing our hands of it, saying it's too dirty for us to be involved in, we should engage with politics as one of the ways to bring about the kingdom of God. One great way of doing this is for church communities to get to know their representatives in Westminster, and vice versa.

Meet Your MP is an initiative to build links between congregations and their MPs.

You could organise a public meeting, invite your MP to visit a church project or event, or take them on a walk of your local area to highlight issues that you feel need to be addressed. Lots of resources and guidance are available, so no previous experience is required.

In England and Wales, visit www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/meetyourmp or in Scotland, visit www.scpo.scot/meet-your-mp for a toolkit and ideas. Get involved and share your stories at #MeetYourMP

If you like the idea, why not make a plan now for how to make it happen in your church?



Pray (5 mins)

Loving God, we pray for our MP, [name].

We pray that at times when we agree with them, as much as at times when we profoundly disagree, you will remind us that we are all made in your divine image.

We pray that they will be given wisdom and judgement in making decisions, and the courage to work for the good of all, resisting the temptations and pressures they may face.

We pray for the friends and family of [name] that they may also feel your love and closeness,

especially at times when [name] feels far away or distracted.

May marriages, friendships and family relationships be given time to deepen and grow away from the pressures of Westminster.

We also pray for the strength and discernment to engage with politics ourselves, not to work towards our own agenda, but to bring about yours.

We ask these prayers in the name of your son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.



Handout 1: political bingo

1a – for groups with members over 18

Find someone who...			
... can name their MP.	... has had a chat with a homeless person this month.	... has signed a petition.	... has bought Fairtrade tea/coffee this month.
... has been on a march/demonstration.	... has written to their MP.	... has listened to or watched the news today.	... can name their local councillor.
... has argued about politics in a church.	... belongs to a campaigning organisation (e.g. Amnesty, Oxfam).	... has raised money for a local concern	... voted for the first time at the last General Election.
... has used public transport this week.	... has registered for a postal vote.	... belongs to a political party.	... voted in the EU referendum.

Handout 1: political bingo

1b – for groups with members under 18

Find someone who...			
... can name their MP.	... has had a chat with a homeless person this month.	... has signed a petition.	... has bought something Fairtrade this month.
... has shared something political on social media.	... has written to their MP.	... has listened to, read or watched the news today.	... can tell you which street the Prime Minister lives on.
... has argued about politics in a church.	... can name four political parties in the UK and Northern Ireland.	... has raised money for a local concern.	... has been with a parent or guardian when they have voted.
... can name five British Prime Ministers	... has voted in an election at school.	... has attended a Church council meeting (or equivalent).	... thinks the voting age should be lowered to 16.

Handout 2: Seeing Jesus in Scripture

These passages from Mark's Gospel illustrate the political implications behind Jesus' actions, and the ways in which he continually challenged the status quo.

Mark 1:16-20

Jesus has just announced the coming of God's kingdom (Mark 1:15), but then calls common labourers to help him in the task. It is not what we might expect, and a sign that Jesus intends to subvert our expectations! Jesus chooses his disciples, which is a reversal of the normal practice where it is the disciples who choose their teacher. The fact that they are ordinary, working people suggests that this new kingdom will be about overturning the structures of power and privilege. Jesus demands the disciples leave their workplace. This means both leaving behind economic security and breaking up the social fabric of the extended family. A new society is being formed. Life will not go on as before.

Mark 1:21-28

This exorcism takes place on the Sabbath in the synagogue – the time and place around which society was carefully ordered and regulated. So this is a way of Jesus challenging the existing order of things. The exorcism is 'framed' by reference to the crowd (verses 22 and 27) which emphasises that this is a very public contest about authority between Jesus and the establishment. What is the demon in the story? The demon is both defiant and fearful. It holds people captive. Jesus is invading the territory of the scribes, where the scribes rule and exercise their authority to teach the law and control the way people live, and it is this 'spirit' Jesus is challenging. Jesus wants to free people held captive to the old authority structures that so often oppress and marginalise people.

Mark 1:29-39

The healing of Simon's mother-in-law takes place in private, after sunset when the Sabbath is over, suggesting that it could easily be a controversial act (see Mark 3:1-6). This is the first time a woman appears in Mark's Gospel. She serves Jesus (verse 31). This word 'serves' is not about giving Jesus food, but about being a follower and a disciple. In the Greek, this word can mean to be an attendant/wait upon (mentally or as a host, friend); technically it can mean to act as a Deacon. Thus, we discover that in God's kingdom, women will not be devalued but will be identified as true disciples. Economic and political circumstances in Palestine had left many poor and dispossessed. Illness and disability were part of this cycle of poverty. So Jesus' care for many in such need challenges the acceptance of these circumstances.

Mark 1:40-45

The leper was the archetypal outcast who was regarded as impure. Only the priest could preside over cleansing. Jesus breaks the purity code by touching the leper, showing that he will not co-operate with laws that marginalise people. The leper is sent to the priest, not out of obedience but to protest! The priest would not accept Jesus' authority, but he is given no choice!

Mark 2:1-12

Jesus' teaching is in opposition to that of the scribes, who see themselves in control of how people must live and behave. They decide how sin is defined and who is guilty, but Jesus will not go along with their exercise of power. The physically disabled were held to be inferior. Jesus not only restores the paralysed man to health, but in doing so challenges the system that declares him sinful. Jesus unilaterally bypasses public authority in order to bring justice and liberation to human life.

Mark 2:13-22

Tax collectors were despised by upright Jews, not least because they collaborated with Gentiles. Jesus transcends such social barriers. A meal takes place involving Jesus, sinners and tax collectors. This is an extraordinary coming together of different groups of people! Again, all kinds of social barriers are being overcome and people brought together across divides. The shared meal was at the heart of society. So the religious authorities were very anxious to control what went on – who could eat together, what the diet should be, etc. Here Jesus subverts such rules and regulations. Jesus has no time for the fasting of the Pharisees, seeing this as the kind of piety that hides real issues. The fact is that it wasn't a great sacrifice for them to go without food for a day as they would have been able to eat their fill the rest of the time; by contrast many Jesus mixed with constantly went hungry.

Mark 2:23-28

The controversies over food continue, and here the question is when and where to eat. The Pharisees set the rules over the sowing, harvesting and marketing of produce, and this included Sabbath rules. But for many poor farmers, these rules were an impossible burden. They could not afford to pay tithes or leave fields fallow. Jesus takes their side by deliberately flouting the rules, engaging in an act of civil disobedience. Jesus endorses the Jubilee principle that hungry people have a right to food despite laws that restrict such access. He sees food as a political issue and a faith issue. God is Lord over the Sabbath!

Mark 3:1-6

Familiar religious and political arguments are at the centre of this healing miracle – Jesus is deliberately defying and breaking the Sabbath laws. The synagogue confrontation reads like a trial scene, with the authorities standing poised to condemn Jesus. But Jesus refused to comply with the Pharisees' laws because it would prevent him from doing good. He raises the deeper issues about the moral health of a society that allows people to stay sick.

Handout 3: Church and state

Accept the benefits and the comforts of co-operating with the state with gratitude.

Rather than worry too much about the world's injustices, we can simply be thankful that, whether by birth or hard work, we can enjoy a comfortable existence. We are part of the system, and it is not in our interests to battle against it. That must be the way God intended it to be!

Example: do you think this is the default model? Can you think of anyone who does this? Do you or have you thought like this?

Seek radical change or revolution.

Inequalities are so much part of the fabric of society that the whole system needs to be exposed and rebuilt, and we must not be afraid to be part of direct confrontation.

Example: the Diggers took this position. Haven't heard of the diggers? Do some research and see what you think of their interpretation of the book of Acts.

Use our position to help others but be cautious about getting ourselves into trouble.

Our power is limited, but it is important to show some concern for the well-being of others. We will give to charities and volunteer our time at the soup kitchen, but not take part in any campaigning or direct action.

Example: this is the model of some but not all charitable giving.

Take non-violent direct action.

When some Christians have felt there are no democratic methods left, they have turned to non-violent direct action as a way of standing up against the power of the state. This can be a high profile witness and full of integrity but is a response usually taken by individual Christians rather than Churches.

Example: Trident Ploughshares – a campaign to disarm the UK Trident nuclear weapons system in a non-violent, open, peaceful and fully accountable manner – took this position.

Stay in co-operation with the state, conscious of the compromises needed, and try to voice effective opposition.

The aim is to try to make the existing structures more just, and this includes a willingness to speak out against the prevailing powers when necessary.

Example: Jubilee 2000 – a global campaign that led to the cancellation of more than \$100 billion of debt owed by 35 of the poorest countries – is an example of such engagement.

Walk away and create an alternative model of how life should be lived.

In Christian history, there have been those who have opted out of mainstream society, creating communities that are radically different, and having as little as possible to do with the rest of the world.

Example: the Amish communities have taken this approach.