As you may have noticed, the United Kingdom will be holding a General Election later this week. And so my mission this morning, should I choose to accept it – which I do! – is to offer a perspective on how to vote. Not, I hasten to reassure you, who to vote for. But some suggestions on how to go about deciding where to cast our vote on Thursday. That’s where we are heading…

I want to begin by asking what government is for. What do you think about that? To help us as we ponder this vital question, there’s some helpful guidance in today’s first reading from Isaiah chapter 11. We discover that the job description for government, set out in this context as the role of the king, is seen in terms of righteousness and justice.

Government exists to create and sustain an environment in which what is right flourishes and prospers while what is wrong is dealt with so that it fades and withers away. In the vivid and colourful poetic language of Isaiah’s prophecy, “He (that is, God’s chosen king) shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear (in other words, he or she won’t be taken in by fake news or make decisions based simply on how things appear on the surface); but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.”

From God’s point of view, what matters first and foremost is justice and righteousness with a particular focus on the needy, the poor, and the vulnerable.

Well, that would be good, wouldn’t it? Blessed are the meek, for they have indeed inherited the earth…

Except that… it feels like a bit of a pipe dream, doesn’t it? The world just doesn’t seem to work quite like that. It all comes across as a bit too idealistic.

I’m chaplain to a local squadron of the Air Training Corps and, a couple of weeks ago, I sat with 30 or 40 teenagers and asked them who they thought God would like to see as Prime Minister. Sadly, but perhaps inevitably, they felt that none of the candidates on offer quite fitted the bill. They knew the sort of things they wanted the next government to be committed to – and, encouragingly, they reflected something of the values we see here in Isaiah 11 – but they didn’t think it would happen any time soon.

Which should, I suggest, come as no surprise to us. For what we have in Isaiah 11 is an idealised picture of what good government would result in if all the choices we make – both as those who are leaders and those who are led – were perfectly aligned with the will of God and fully tuned into his purposes. If we followed the promptings of the Spirit of God and allowed his influence and power to flow freely. This is what the kingdom of God looks like. This is what happens when the King of kings is on the throne.

But the sobering truth is that no system of human government quite gets there and many fall a good way short. And the thing is that this is not just because of the deficiencies we see exposed in those who offer themselves for leadership. There are also the issues we find in the rest of us, we who are being led. For example, take the electoral attractiveness of the promise of tax cuts versus the electoral suicide committed by those who propose tax increases. We can’t simply point to our TVs and say the problem is that incompetent shower we see on the screen. It’s not just them; it’s us as well!

In the words of our Coventry Litany of Reconciliation: The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class. The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own. The greed which
exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth. Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others. Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee. The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children. The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God. Our response to all of these always has to be, not ‘Father, forgive them’, but simply ‘Father, forgive’. It’s us as well. We get the governments we deserve…

But even as we face up to the truth that the kingdom of God is not going to be revealed in its fullness next Friday – any more than, picking up the closing paragraph of today’s reading, the lions in the nation’s zoos are all going to turn vegetarian! – we can at least lend our support, our encouragement, our vote, to those who are moving in the right direction. As the churchwarden of a church I was vicar of used to say – go for the ‘least worst’ option. This is what we need to decide on Thursday.

Writing in an era before everyone had a vote, John Wesley made this entry in his diary on October 3rd 1774: “I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them: 1) To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy. 2) To speak no evil of the person they voted against. 3) To take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.”

It’s good advice, isn’t it, especially in the toxic atmosphere in which so much of our politics is carried out today. And so here are five suggestions about how to vote...

1. Vote prayerfully – let’s consciously make our decisions under the watchful eye of our heavenly Father. It’s a secret ballot, yes – but not to him!

2. Vote thoughtfully – and maybe something like the discussion the Dean will chair after today’s service will help us in this – doing our best to gather the facts rather than relying on the biased opinions of others. How about broadening our perspective by reflecting on the views of the Telegraph as well as the Guardian, or of taking a look at the Daily Mirror in addition to the Daily Mail... and vice versa!

3. Vote selflessly – how about trying not to base our decisions on what is likely to be most advantageous to us personally but to follow Isaiah’s lead by thinking of the most vulnerable people we know and voting in their best interests instead?

4. Vote realistically – by which I mean resisting the temptation to think that sorting out society’s problems is something we can just leave to the government – whichever party gets in. As if casting my vote is the only thing I need do in order to be a responsible citizen. No – it’s not all down to the politicians... where government can’t or won’t take action I need to do my bit too. So – what can I do to make a practical difference in situations of need and hardship? Rather than just blame others, how can I make things better?

5. Vote hopefully. You see, turning to today’s Gospel reading, John the Baptist was quite right: ‘...the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ In the person of Jesus Christ, the king has begun his reign, beginning in the hearts of those who turn to him in repentance and faith, those who decide to align themselves with what matters to him, acknowledging that he is indeed Christ the Lord.

The truth is that we’re not to expect too much from this or any other General Election. But that’s OK. For we are called instead to place our hope in God, the God who has promised to finish what he has started and, one day, usher in his kingdom once and for all. This is our focus during this season of Advent. That one day every knee will bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Maranatha! Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.