Last month, we celebrated the culmination of our liturgical church year with Christ the King Sunday, while this month we begin anew as we wait in Advent for our Newborn King.  This year, more than any other, I have been aware of the political imagery which saturates scripture and liturgical vocabulary.  (It may interest you to do a search in the Bible and our liturgies for words like king, ruler, messiah, authority, power, principalities, dominions, etc.)  Perhaps it is because I am convinced more than ever that the world has yet to see a political order which embodies God’s desire for humanity to live together in divinely empowered peace.

The prophets (often considered “the voice of Advent”) resound again and again God’s intention – “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)  This kind of peace is not simply a spiritual, inner-serenity and an escape from the woes of this world.  Rather it drives us deep into the division and discord, hurts and hungers of our neighbors, community, nation and world (and yes, even ourselves) – with a message of Good News and hope!  This was, is and ever shall be embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Inspired by the prophets, Archbishop Desmond Tutu once offered a distinction between mercy and justice.  “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river.  We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”

Mercy is pulling people from the river: sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, providing quilts to the cold, welcoming the stranger.  We do this very well at Atonement and I am regularly encouraged by your faithful compassion.

Justice is the hard work of “going against the flow,” to wade upstream, and confront the powers which compromise the worth and dignity of God’s creation.  Justice draws us into the political realm – not the “liberal/conservative,” “Republican/Democrat,” “my way/your way” kind of politics – but the “God’s desire/world’s ambition” kind of politics.

Here’s where the humility part comes in.  The Apostle Paul addresses us boldly when he says “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.  Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.  Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:1-4)

Think of it another way: Martin Luther had a Two Kingdoms theory which asserts that, by our baptismal calling, Christians are anchored in two political realities.  Christians stand with one foot in a spiritual kingdom and another foot in an earthly kingdom.  He said the Kingdom of God continues to come into being because those who belong to Christ faithfully engage in Jesus’ earthly work of mercy and justice – regardless what national or political connections we might have.

There is always the question – in which kingdom will you put your trust?  For us who belong to Christ, our trust is always in God.  Instead of feeling that the church has no voice or role in earthly politics, may you be encouraged by the witness of the prophets, Martin Luther, Desmond Tutu, and – most importantly – Jesus himself, to bring forth the Kingdom of God as we strive towards justice, mercy and humility in the world around us.

This Advent, listen closely to God’s Word as we discover our role in God’s mission to the world.  It is indeed hard work.  But it’s better when we do it together.