

# Waking Up Christian

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by the Rev. Jeffrey Ross

For many, life in our country has become very complex and confusing to navigate. Fractures based upon partisanship and positions on social issues have deepened divisions within these United States. It is tempting to think that this is a unique experience and time, yet if we scratch beneath the surface of our national history, we find division and questions about equity and equality have been persistent since before the founding of our nation 250 years ago. Indeed, no nation is conflict free. It is easy to miss struggles when they do not impact us directly. Perhaps what is really going on is that we are collectively waking up to a deeper awareness. We are awakening to the need to put our faith in God above all else and to deepen our concern for our sisters and brothers who bear the Divine Image.

In every generation, the Church is asked — sometimes gently and sometimes with urgency — to remember who and whose we are. For Episcopalians, this question is not merely theological; it is profoundly practical. It touches how we vote, how we speak to neighbors, how we treat those with whom we disagree, and how we respond to the suffering we encounter in the world. At the heart of our identity stands a simple yet demanding truth: our primary allegiance is not to a nation, a political party, or an ideology, but to Jesus Christ.

This claim is not a rejection of civic life. Anglicans have long understood public engagement as part of faithful discipleship. We pray for the nation and its leaders. We give thanks for the freedoms we enjoy. Many serve honorably in public office, the military, education, and community leadership. Yet the Church has always insisted that love of country must never eclipse love of God. When loyalties compete, Christ must come first, beyond everything else!

Jesus himself makes this clear. When asked about ultimate allegiance, he redirects attention beyond earthly claims: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt. 22:21). The implication is unmistakable — everything ultimately belongs to God, including our hearts, our conscience, and our moral imagination. Nations rise and fall; parties shift and realign; but the reign of God endures forever. As followers of Christ, we are commissioned through our baptism to work for the expansion of God’s dominion.

Putting Christ before country does not diminish patriotism; rather, it purifies it. It frees us from confusing national success with the kingdom of God. History offers sobering reminders of the harm that comes when Christianity becomes fused with political power — when the cross is draped in a flag and faith is reduced to a tool of cultural dominance. The Church loses its prophetic voice whenever it becomes captive to partisan interests.

Our Anglican tradition offers a better way: a posture both rooted and spacious, committed yet humble. We are shaped not by ideological manifestos but by the rhythms of common prayer and sacramental life. Week after week, we gather at the Eucharistic table where every earthly distinction is relativized. Republicans and Democrats, independents and the politically disengaged — all kneel side by side, hands outstretched in the same posture of need. No party platform can grant what is given there: the grace of Christ's own life. This is why our Book of Common Prayer teaches us that the Eucharist is our central act of worship.

If the Eucharist reveals our unity, the Baptismal Covenant tells us how to live it. Whenever we reaffirm those promises, we are reminded that baptism is not a private spiritual milestone but an initiation into a way of life that has public consequences. The spiritual journey of life is one where we are constantly renewing our covenant and deepening our commitment to Christ.

Consider the vows we make.

We promise to “persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever [we] fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.” This commitment requires moral clarity that transcends partisan talking points. Evil is not confined to one political camp; it appears wherever fear overrides compassion, wherever truth is distorted, wherever power is used to harm rather than to heal. Our baptism calls us to examine our own hearts before condemning others and to resist the temptation to baptize our preferred policies as if they were synonymous with God's will.

We promise to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” Notice that this proclamation is not limited to sermons or evangelistic programs. Our civic behavior is itself a form of witness. The tone of our public speech, our willingness to listen, our refusal to caricature those who differ from us — all of these testify to whether Christ truly governs our lives. In a culture often marked by outrage and contempt, Christians are called to demonstrate (as St. Paul said in 1 Cor 12:31), “a more excellent way.”

We promise to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving [our] neighbor as [ourselves].” Here the Covenant dismantles every attempt to rank human worth according to citizenship, economic productivity, ethnicity, or social status. If Christ is present in all persons, then the immigrant, the prisoner, the unhoused neighbor, the struggling parent, and the forgotten elder are not problems to be solved but sacraments of divine presence. To serve them is to serve as Christ would himself.

Perhaps most challenging of all, we vow to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” This is not a suggestion; it is a baptismal obligation. Justice, in the biblical sense, is not merely fairness but the restoration of right relationship — shalom, the flourishing God desires for creation. Peace is not the absence of conflict but the commitment to struggle together and work for reconciliation.

These promises awaken us to the needs of the powerless and marginalized because they train us to see the world through the eyes of Jesus. Repeatedly in the Gospels, Christ moves toward those pushed to the edges: lepers, tax collectors, women dismissed by society, the poor, the sick, the sinner. He does not wait for them to become respectable; he meets them in their vulnerability. If we place Christ before every other allegiance, we will inevitably find ourselves drawn in the same direction.

This does not mean that faithful Christians will always agree about policy solutions. The Church is not called to unanimity of opinion but to unity of love. Reasonable people, profoundly committed to the Gospel, may differ on the best ways to address complex social realities. Yet our disagreements must never erode our recognition that each person is beloved of God and that Jesus calls us to work toward unity (John 17:20-21).

What distinguishes Christian engagement is therefore less the specific position we hold and more the spirit in which we hold it. Are we motivated by fear or by hope? By tribal loyalty or by compassion? Are we seeking victory over opponents, or the common good of all?

When Christ stands at the center, we are liberated from the anxiety that so often distorts political life. We remember that no election can fully inaugurate the kingdom of God, and no defeat can thwart it. This freedom allows us to participate in civic life with both seriousness and serenity — to advocate passionately without despair, to work for change without demonizing others.

The Church's vocation is ultimately prophetic rather than partisan. Like the prophets of Israel, we are called to speak truth even when it unsettles our preferred alliances. Sometimes this will mean affirming what is good in our national life; at other times it will mean challenging policies or cultural patterns that wound God's children. Either way, our credibility depends on our willingness to be guided by the Gospel rather than by political expediency.

Putting Christ before country and party also reshapes our imagination of power. In the world's calculus, power is often measured by control, influence, and dominance. But the power revealed in Jesus is cruciform — self-giving, sacrificial, poured out for the life of the world. When the Church aligns itself with this kind of power, it becomes a community where the overlooked are honored and the voiceless are heard. We must eschew those whose goal is the denigration and dehumanization of others, whose only pursuit is personal power and privilege. We are commissioned to advocate for those who are marginalized by the selfish pursuits of others. As people of faith, as people who walk in the ways of justice and mercy, we are to advocate for their dignity and protect them from the abuses of political power.

The Baptismal Covenant does more than instruct; it sends us. Having been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever, we are commissioned to embody God's reconciling love wherever we are planted. Some will live this calling through advocacy,

others through quiet acts of mercy, still others through the steady work of building communities where dignity is upheld. None of these ministries is small in the eyes of God. We are all ambassadors of Christ, who work together to make God's compassion tangible and real to a fractured and hurting world (2 Cor. 5:16-20).

In a polarized age, the Episcopal Church has a particular gift to offer: a witness that faith can be both deeply rooted and generously open, morally serious yet gracious in tone. By placing Christ before every lesser loyalty, we become a people capable of bridging divides rather than deepening them.

Each time we renew our baptismal promises, we answer, "I will, with God's help." Those words matter! They remind us that this way of life is not sustained by our own virtue but by grace. We will falter; we will sometimes confuse the kingdom of God with the kingdoms of this world. Yet God remains faithful, continually drawing us back to the waters of baptism, where our truest citizenship is revealed.

For our citizenship, as St. Paul writes to the Philippians (3:20), "is in heaven." From that identity flows our mission on earth: to love without boundary, to serve without calculation, and to walk humbly with our God. When Christ comes before country and party, the Church becomes what it was always meant to be — a sign of God's hope for a fractured world, and a living invitation to the justice, mercy, and peace that lie at the heart of the Gospel.

As the baptized, we are all called to bear the hope we have been given through the love of Christ. Hope that orients us to humility and service of others rather than division and domination. Hope that is grounded in moral action with mercy, not fear. Hope that makes a place for justice and peace at the heart of our common life together. Hope that insists that suffering, solidarity, and love of others, including our enemies, belong in our witness and spiritual practices of our daily lives. If we cannot begin to create this in our own behavior, then we will not be able to make it real for others and be the people Christ hoped for and for whom he died. We must wake up to the reality of what it means to be followers of Jesus.

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