The Brexit and Trump votes in June and November of this year have many things in common – their unexpected nature, the scorn poured upon the winners by educated elites, the populism of the victorious protagonists, the visceral hatred unleashed, the rather far-fetched promises of the successful campaigns, and the losers’ nightmarish anticipations of what will now come to pass. But one particular feature represented in both movements was a rejection of politics. For Brexit, conventional politics was either a sell-out of sovereignty from Westminster to Brussels, or a stitch-up by the privileged London classes at the expense of the downtrodden provincial masses. For the trumpeters of Trump, Washington was a broken, wasteful, self-indulgent culture of fiddling while the economy of middle America burns, and what was required was a bonfire of the vanities of expertise, experience, and dynastic presidency.

The losers of the two votes share a twin dilemma. The first half of the dilemma is how to participate in the new politics: whether to dwell in the denial or despair of what seems a set of catastrophic decisions, or whether to be upbeat and say much remains to be seen, the known deficits are outnumbered by the unknown possibilities, and the game is very much still to be won. The second half of the dilemma is how to come to terms with the half of the population that voted for something that seemed at once unimaginable and horrifying: whether to hide in the bubble of like-minded dismay, or instead humbly to seek out, meet, and learn from people who apparently think so differently, feel so alienated, and harbour such deep anger.

For those who feel like strangers in their own country, and wonder if the qualities they most value in their culture are becoming a minority cause, the prophet Isaiah may be a source of insight, enlightenment and encouragement. Isaiah chapter 11 begins with an uncompromising, blunt, almost brutal word: stump. It’s a horrifying word, conjuring images of amputation, loss, ugliness, finality. You look at what’s left after a tree’s been chopped down and you see an empty space where once there was life; a future sawn off. But if you think about a freshly-felled tree, it’s still got a vast network of roots underground. Those don’t immediately cease to work just because there’s not a lot left above the soil. And so there’s always the possibility that a shoot will surface from out of the severed stump.

And that’s what Isaiah describes. He’s writing in troubled times. More than half of Israel has been invaded, dismantled, and destroyed by the Assyrians. What’s left is under intense threat. Yet in the midst of despair he offers a vision of a new politics. A shoot will arise from the same family that produced David, Solomon, and the great kings of Israel.

And this will be the new kind of politics that rises from the ashes of the old. Solomon once asked God for a wise and understanding heart. This is talking about two kinds of wisdom. One’s the kind that can step away, formulate ideas, and work out the theory. The other’s the kind that can roll up sleeves, get in the thick of things, build alliances and make compromises. Wisdom and understanding. Then there’s another pair of virtues, counsel and might. Again, it’s about recognising politics needs a balance of two things, in this case, careful planning and preparation, matched with vigorous execution and follow-through. Counsel and might. Like theoretical and practical wisdom, the one is useless
without the other. And then there’s a third pair of virtues, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. On the one hand a sense of what’s possible, what works, where your limitations are, where your strengths lie; on the other hand a sense of who God is, how small we are before God, how limitless is the grace and possibility and generosity and mercy of God. A rational recognition of human potential, and a faithful apprehension of divine wonder: knowledge and the fear of the Lord. If the first pair echo Solomon, this last pair echo David, who in his last words speaks of just rule as that which stands in fear of God.

So out of the desperation of Israel grows a new shoot from the house of David and Solomon, and this time the lessons of those two flawed leaders have been learned. Politics is now to be characterised by theoretical and practical wisdom, by careful planning and vigorous execution, by human endeavour and divine grace. But Isaiah hasn’t finished his description of what makes true politics. We now get an account of what it means to be righteous. It’s interesting our culture has become sceptical about any hope of being righteous. Today we only use the word in two senses: either entirely negatively, as in the highly critical term ‘self-righteous’ – or rather condescendingly, as in the phrase ‘righteous indignation,’ with which we describe someone who’s correct, but has lost their temper, or at least their sense of proportion. But Isaiah has twin understandings of the word righteous, which we could call uprightness and faithfulness. Uprightness simply means being fair, upholding the rule of law, not making arbitrary judgements, not showing bias on account of personal favour or gain, showing dependability and consistency and keeping one’s promises. But faithfulness means recognising that life is not fair, that when the rules are enforced there are those that don’t fit them and lose out through no fault of their own, that people deserve a second chance, that it’s possible to be unlucky, disadvantaged, oppressed, and that a good politics doesn’t just reward those who benefit from uprightness but remains faithful to those who lose out.

You could be forgiven for thinking the new politics could stop right there. Leaders who exhibit these virtues are worthy of public support; leaders who don’t are not. Isaiah promises that God will raise up a new leader who will indeed embody such qualities like no one has before. That’s the politics that thinks. But Isaiah has a whole other dimension to tell us about. Isaiah wants to offer us also the politics that dreams. In Woody Allen’s words, ‘The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid... but the lamb and the kid won’t get a whole lot of sleep.’ Isaiah changes the focus from the politics of the city to the flourishing of the animal creation. Just imagine, he says, a life that has no danger, no insecurity, no evil. Picture being a shepherd who has no anxiety that a predator will decimate your flock. Visualise trusting your baby to linger around a snake pit, or beholding your young child train wolves, leopards and lions. Isaiah is self-consciously revisiting the Fall narrated in Genesis 3, where a serpent took up enmity against God and humankind. This scene is a vivid depiction of what it might be like to reverse the effects of the Fall, and suppose creation where life isn’t defined by scarcity, envy or antagonism, by hurt or destruction. And then in a single sentence Isaiah stunningly brings the political and the pastoral together in a harmony of grace: the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Everything he’s said in the first part of his description can be summed up in that simple phrase, ‘the knowledge of the Lord’: it’s the best of human wisdom, knowledge, but it’s the infusion of divine wisdom, the knowledge of the Lord. And it’s as comprehensive as the waters that cover the sea. Just close your eyes and lie right back prostrate and feel the warm cleansing water run over your body right up over you giving you strength and peace and healing and calm. The world will be full of the knowledge of God just like that, just like the warm cleansing water rises up over your weary, spent body. Feel the joy of that.

Here’s Isaiah, in the midst of chaos, destruction, and despair, describing the resurrection of politics: a politics that thinks the way God thinks, with ideas and practicalities, planning and implementation, human effort and divine grace, upright trust and faithful compassion; but a politics that also dreams the way God dreams, with the innocence and simplicity of a child, with the withering away of animosity and hostility, with a gentle immersion in mercy and truth.
What a beautiful idea. What a vision. What a dream.

But wait. We read this today not as an idle poem or a pious fantasy. It's not simply an idea, a vision, or a dream. We read it because these words became flesh. There was one who was the beautiful idea of God and the tangible reality of God, who was God’s plan but saw that plan through to the very end, who knew what it meant to be human and knew what it meant to be God. There was one who was so upright he did not fight on his own behalf when he was arrested, who spent his life among the rejected and outcast of the world. There was one who sprung up from the root of Jesse and came from the line of David, who emerged from the stump of Israel, who was born in the midst of the lamb, the calf, and the kid. And there was one who came as a little child to reverse the effects of the Fall, to invade our despair and inspire us to dream again.

And so we believe in the resurrection of politics because Jesus is the resurrection of politics. Jesus is the idea of God made flesh, the word of wisdom and the flesh of creation, the best that humanity can do and the grace of God that meets us in our weakness. Should we ever despair about our country, our choices, or our politics, we may always go back and read Isaiah 11. Because there we will discover how to walk in God’s ways, there we will recall how God has already walked those ways and will walk them with us all our days, and there we will realise that when our spirit is spent, the Spirit of the Lord will come with the wonder of a new shoot and the simplicity of a little child and summon us into the dream of God.