

Tales of Leadership Pentecost 19 – 23rd October 2011

Readings:

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12, 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8, Matthew 22: 34-46

There's an issue that seems to be preoccupying the minds of many people today and the chattering classes in particular. It is one that affects us all. One that is especially needed in uncertain times. And it's one that sadly seems to be missing in our society. I speak of "Good Leadership."

So tell me what makes a good leader?

Well, we all seem to have some understanding about what it takes to be a good leader. Then why is it that, in our fragile society, good leaders are so hard to find?

So this morning in search of an answer I'm going to do what any good minister would do - I'm going to Scripture for an answer. For I believe each of our readings this morning says something about good leadership.

Deuteronomy 34 is as close as you'll get to a eulogy for the great Hebrew prophet, Moses. Like many a leader, Moses is appreciated more in death than he was in life. For here's a leader who is very reluctant to assume the mantle of power. He argues with God about his suitability. Here's a leader who could not stand up to the scrutiny of today's press gallery - after all he comes to leadership as a wanted man, wanted in Egypt for the murder of an Egyptian slave driver. Here's a leader who repeatedly is ignored, as the children of Israel seek to go their own way, grumbling and rebellious. If there were opinion polls back then Moses would have been out on his ear.

Good old Aaron knew how to give a good party - look at the golden calf.

By the standards of our day Moses would have been rolled by a disgruntled caucus.

But thankfully leadership can never be judged by the lowly standards of our age. And so upon sober reflection we have these words from our Deuteronomy reading this morning: ***"Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel."***

In Moses we have a leader intimately connected with his God, clear about where he and his people were to travel, willing to put up with foolishness bordering on rebellion, because of his connection with a God who loves fickle children. And God's love seems to be infectious, for how else is Moses willing to forgive them their foolish ways.

So the life of Moses gives these clues to what good leadership is all about - humility, persistence, an ability to see the big picture and a willingness to stand up to what he knows

from his God is the right thing to do, a clear vision for the future, of where he wishes to lead his people, and probably most of all, a real love for the people he leads.

And then there is Paul, a leader who is still able to influence his followers from gaol. One who like Moses has known rejection by those who he sought to lead, obviously hurt here by his treatment from the church at Philippi. But he too is full of a vision for God's people that springs from a close walk with his God. So unlike many leaders past and present he claims that his appeal to his followers, ***"does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery."*** He goes on to say that he ***"never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals,..... But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."***

Now there's the leadership that we all yearn for - isn't it. The leadership I heard you sing out at the beginning of this sermon - one where the concern for the followers is foremost in the mind of the leader. One that stems from a deep gentle love for others and one untainted by greed or by what other vested interests think. A simple leadership that goes far beyond the mere satisfaction of ego for power.

And then finally there's Jesus. Beset on all sides by the vested interests eager to bend him to their wills, Jesus in our Gospel passage trumpets out what in today's terms would be his mission statement - the source of his leadership charisma - his fervent adherence to love: ***"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."***

In the end these were the only things that mattered to Jesus - love of God, love of neighbour, and love of self. As far as Jesus is concerned, when we fail to love God, our neighbour or ourself, disaster follows. Any leadership worth its salt will emphasise this. In the end this is the mission statement of not only Jesus but also Moses and Paul. It's what made them all great leaders. Leaders that millions of people try to follow even now, thousands of years later - servant leadership, informed completely by the way of love. This is the leadership we cry out for. But perhaps, just perhaps it's the leadership to which we each are called. Like Moses we might be reluctant to assume the leadership mantle. Like Jesus, Paul and Moses we will almost certainly face opposition from vested interests, but like all three, if we love God, our neighbour and ourself, it is the only path to follow.

Finally a story I've told before - a story of gentle leadership:

The Keeper of the Springs

There was a quiet forest dweller who lived high above an Austrian village along the eastern slopes of the Alps. The old gentleman had been hired many years ago by an earlier town council to clear away the debris of leaves and branches from the pristine springs up in the mountain ravines. These springs fed the pool from which the town gathered its water supply via a canal system.

With faithful regularity, the old man patrolled the nearby hills, removed leaves and branches, and cleared away the silt that otherwise would have clogged up and contaminated the fresh flow of water. In time, the village became a popular tourist attraction, and a favourite spot for holiday makers. Graceful swans floated along the canals. The mill wheels from many businesses cranked day and night, farm lands were irrigated, and the view from the village was picture picturesque.

Years passed. Until one evening at a town council meeting, assembled to review the budget, one member noticed the salary figure contracted to the obscure keeper of the springs. The treasurer questioned the expense and asked, "Who is this old man? Why do we keep him on a salary year after year? Has anyone ever seen him?" The treasurer went on, "For all we know the strange ranger in the hills might be dead. Anyway, he isn't need any more." So by unanimous vote, the council dispensed with the old guardian's services.

For several weeks nothing changed. However by early autumn, the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the springs hindering the rushing flow of sparkling water.

Then, one afternoon someone noticed a slight yellowish-brown tint in the pool. A few days later, the water was much darker. Within another week, a slimy slick covered the sections of the water along the canal banks and a foul odour was soon detected. The mill wheels slowly ground to a halt. The swans left as did the tourists. Clammy fingers of disease and sickness crept deeply into the heart of the village.

Quickly an embarrassed town council called a special meeting. Realising their gross error in judgement to save some money, they rehired the old keeper of the springs and within several weeks the sparkling river of life began to clear up. The mill wheels cranked again, and renewed life returned to the village in the Alps.

*(And what was the name of the Keeper of the Springs? According to town records, his name was Integrity, Joshua, Jesus, Servant.)
Are we in need of such a Leader?*

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