

Speaking out as sisters and brothers of Christ

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Pentecost + 2B 6-6-21 : 1 Sam 8, Ps 138, 1 Cor 4, Mk 3.20-35

Today's Bible readings get us to think about good leadership. They help us explore the way we receive God's leadership, and to think about what sort of people should, be leaders among us. We get a strong hint from the Psalmist: *though the Lord is exalted, he looks upon the lowly and he comprehends the proud from afar*. In other words, God comes close to the little people, but keeps the proud at a distance.

Today's Gospel specifically warns us about bad leaders. Jesus' family know the sort of leaders they have, and they fear for Jesus' safety. His ministry has directly defied the authority of these leaders. His family are hearing others say that Jesus must have gone mad; and you can understand why. Vested religious and political interests are very dangerous. These people bite; witness Jesus' arrest and execution.

Jesus' family come and try to call him away, but too late. The scribes have already arrived from Jerusalem and taken matters into their own hands. These religious leaders hear people saying he's out of his mind, and choose to build on that. Their tactic is slander: they publicly announce that Jesus has an unclean spirit.

Slander is utterly forbidden among God's people. The ninth commandment says, *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour*. The religious leaders from Jerusalem abuse their position of authority to misrepresent Jesus' care for the sick and needy as the devil's work; it's malicious, lying slander. That's bad leadership. We know slander remains a

tactic that leaders still use against people who threaten their power. And it poisons any who accept them as legitimate and follow their lead.

Jesus responds very effectively to their slander with his parables of the house divided and robbers binding the strong man. His parables deftly expose the falsity of their slander.

But then his next words are terrifying. ²⁸ *‘Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’* – ³⁰*for [the scribes] had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’*

The scribes saw Jesus heal people and exorcise demons from them by the power of the Holy Spirit, yet they called this work of the Holy Spirit satanic. Jesus says what they have done is an eternal sin – the unforgiveable sin. I remember being terrified as a teenager that I might do this accidentally. [The story of the Methodist lay-preacher’s snowman.] But actually, committing the unforgiveable sin is not something you do by mistake. It means seeing a wonderful work of the Holy Spirit, and fully in your right mind, denouncing it as evil – calling it a work of Satan. Few people will sink so far.

But when a leader is known to resort to malicious, lying slander – particularly when they recast the work of the Spirit as the work of Satan, they can poison the spirit of their community. Then someone must warn their community: name the evil and warn them; protect them from following this lead.

And that’s where we come in. We are Jesus’ family – we are *sisters and brothers and mothers of Jesus*. We are called to name slander for the lie it is, and protect those whom it might harm. Jesus identifies his true family as those who do the will of God, like him. That’s a call to us to be leaders

like him – servant leaders. And the calling of servant leaders – from what we’ve read in the Scriptures this morning – is to heal the sick, and to deliver the weakest and most vulnerable from whatever evil oppresses them, and to do this work without fear or favour, and without expecting anything in return.

Deliver the weakest and most vulnerable from whatever oppresses them. We know who they are – they are people often slandered by false leaders: disproportionately imprisoned Aboriginal people whom our justice systems fail; victims of abuse and violation – women and children who cry out for justice, yet are slandered by those who say they were asking for it, and find themselves disbelieved by the authorities.

Others habitually slandered are refugees; the unemployed; the homeless; even the mentally ill and abandoned victims of disaster; all of them so often falsely accused – just as Jesus was. And in this week of the Tiananmen Square anniversary, yesterday’s World Environment Day, and with Reconciliation Week so recent, we see clearly on just what scale slander and denial are prepared to operate.

By naming and resisting such evil, we serve the poor and the weak. We must always remember what Jesus said, and be strengthened and convicted to speak out and to act, ... *“Truly I tell you, just as you [cared for / stood up for] one of the least of these ... you did it to me.”* Mt 25.40

By speaking out as Jesus did, by serving those he served, the Church must offer the world the type of leadership which alone heals and makes whole. This is our calling as the royal priesthood of all the baptised.
Amen.