

Servant Leadership

Provided by Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + 3B -1 Sam 8, Ps 138, 2 Cor 4, Mk 3 20-35

The subject of today's Bible readings is servant leadership. Three of today's readings are about how we receive God's leadership—we who proclaim God as our guide. They're about the way we receive God's leadership, and also about the type of people who should, in God's view, be leaders among us.

The Psalmist knows God's in charge. ²*I will bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name because of your faithfulness and your loving-kindness, for you have made your name and your word supreme over all things.* Kings praise God.

But there's a verse we might miss if we're not awake, ⁶*though the Lord is exalted, he looks upon the lowly and he comprehends the proud from afar.* God's interested in the little people. God won't mix with the proud. So leadership among God's people is not to be given to those who would seize it. Such people are not close to God. True leaders in God's community are more likely to be called from among the lowly—the meek—and leadership in God's community is to be focussed more on the needs of the lowly than on the rich and influential.

The reading from Samuel underlines this. Leadership in God's community is not like leadership in the secular world. Israel already had a wonderful leader in Samuel. Samuel had been close to God all his life. So as Israel's judge and prophet, he gave wise and faithful leadership. In Samuel's time, God was tangibly there with the people of Israel, as provider and protector. But the elders knew Samuel's sons were nothing like *him*. They panicked. They couldn't see an obvious succession plan. So they ganged up on Samuel; tried to bully him into giving them a King; the sort of leader everyone else had.

Samuel was naturally upset, but his first response was to seek God's wisdom; he prayed.

And obeying God, he warned the elders about the sort of leadership they could expect from a king. He was right, of course. What he said remains true to this day—except that the 10% taxation he predicted was not where it would stop.

But the question for us remains: the leadership of God's people, what's it about? True leaders I've known are always thankful people. They see the best in everyone, and they have a strong sense of their servanthood. They want to offer something back; particularly to make a contribution to people who struggle—to raise them up. And we know from the footwashing story in John's gospel that this was the spirit of leadership that Jesus has called all of us to exercise.

Today's Gospel specifically warns us about bad leaders. Jesus' family and the crowds, knowing the leaders they have, begin to be afraid for Jesus' safety. His mission's become too high-profile. He must be mad to let this happen. Vested interests both in the temple and in the political world are very dangerous. Question the authority of these people and they bite. We know the story of Jesus' arrest and execution; they bite very hard.

But the family gets to him too late. The authorities are already down from Jerusalem and they're taking matters in hand. Their tactic is slander: they publicly declare Jesus to be in league with the devil. 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 misrepresent Jesus' care for the needy with their malicious, lying slander—he has a demon. That's bad leadership.

We know that slander still remains a tactic that leaders use against the people who threaten their power. The tragedy is,

it poisons the spirit of any group or society which accepts leadership from them. We find out why after the next few verses.

Jesus begins to respond to their slander with the parables of the house divided and robbers binding the strong man. His parables expose the falseness of their slander. But his next words are terrifying. ²⁸ *'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter;* ²⁹*but 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, but they called this Holy Spirit power satanic. Jesus says what they have done is an eternal sin—the unforgiveable sin. I remember being terrified of this as a teenager. I thought I might have done it. But actually, committing the unforgiveable sin is pretty hard. It means seeing a wonderful act of the Holy Spirit, and fully in your right mind, calling it evil—calling it a work of the devil. Few people will sink so far.

But when a leader is known to resort to malicious, lying slander—to call good works evil—and when the people they lead know this, yet still accept their leadership, it can poison the spirit of that group or society. They are being led astray in a most Godless manner, and they are knowingly following this lead. Someone must warn them: name the evil and warn them. And that's where we come in. We—Jesus' family—brothers and sisters and mothers of Jesus.

Jesus identifies his true family as those who do the will of God, like him. That makes us leaders like him—servant leaders. And the calling of servant leaders—from what we've read in the Scriptures this morning—the calling of servant leaders is to heal the sick, and to deliver the weakest and most vulnerable

from whatever oppresses them, and to do this work without fear or favour.

Deliver the weakest and most vulnerable from whatever oppresses them. We know who they are—they are people slandered by false leaders:

- Aboriginal people whom our society fails;
- victims of abuse and attack who cry out for justice, yet are slandered by those who say they were asking for it because of how they dressed;
- refugees;
- the unemployed;
- the homeless;
- the mentally ill;
- victims of disaster;

all of them so often falsely accused, and, so, just like Jesus. As he said, ... *“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

So how do we serve Jesus? By doing as he did; by serving those he served—and in our service, we offer the world the type of leadership which alone heals and makes it whole. This is our calling as the royal priesthood of all the baptised. Amen