

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 18 OCTOBER 2009

Professor John Langmore

Job 38: 1-7; Psalm 104: 1-9, 24, 35c; Mark 10: 35-45

“Reflections on Power”

One way in which the themes of the readings we have heard today can be described is about the place of humankind in God's creation. In the Gospel Jesus makes clear that that in his community those seeking leadership must do so by becoming a servant. One aspect of that is the specific discouragement of excessive ambition for power. There may be lessons for us in this, but there are certainly lessons for many in our country, for Australia and for the world.

The Gospel is the story of James and John's extraordinary presumption in asking Jesus for the most honoured places next to him, equivalent to being prime minister and treasurer in a government. Jesus could well have been angry at such a bid for personal power, as were the other ten disciples, but instead responds with rhetorical questions about their willingness to drink the cup that he drinks or be baptised with the baptism with which he is to be baptised, which gently point to the enormity of their misunderstanding. **Jesus does not directly criticise them for seeking leadership** but rather insists that these positions are not his to allocate. He then uses the opportunity to give clear instructions about the nature of leadership. He contrasts the leadership-as-dominance of tyrants with the leadership-as-service expected of his followers: '...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant'.

When a teenager I found this story troubling: what is the place of ambition? Is ambition always wrong? Can it ever be right to aspire to leadership? In due course I came to realise that this story needs be put in the context of other parts of Jesus teaching about how we are to serve others – by being a neighbour, by being as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove and so on – and by Paul's metaphor of there being many parts of the body all of which are vital.

It is important to note that Jesus says nothing to deprecate the importance of leadership. His comments are about the nature of leadership and he uses himself as an example, concluding the section by saying that 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'. His contribution was unique but some others have also been called to give their lives for others. All of us are called to serve others in ways which are unique to our abilities and situations, in our homes, at work, in the church, in community organisations and public policy. Simply doing our work effectively and with humanity is one of the most important.

Psalm 104 has something to say about this. Psalm 104 is principally 'an extended celebration of the goodness and awesome character of creation'. [Brueggemann, p 31] This is summarised in verse 24 'O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures'. In the previous verse 23, which was not part of the lectionary reading, the place of humanity in creation is described: 'People go out to their work and to their labour until the evening.' The significance of this is not about going out to work: many people, women and men, have always stayed at home to do their work! The point is about our function as workers in God's creation. Work is not a curse or a burden but rather a proper expression of the life of humankind.

One thinks of Brother Lawrence who wrote about the way we sweep a room as being an aspect of the way we worship God – and the way we care for each other. How much more is that obviously

true of the way we care for our partners, children, grandchildren, neighbours, friends – and the asylum seekers who come in desperation to our shores. Our country was shamed last week by the cruelty of the comments which both major party leaders felt obliged by public opinion to make about the Sri Lankan Tamils seeking admission to Australia.

Political leaders are like the rest of us, they have conflicting loyalties and commitments. I was aware as a Member of Parliament of four strong loyalties each of which mattered: to the party which preselected me, to the voters who elected me, to my colleagues in parliament and to my own commitments and values. Each of these is important and often they are in conflict. A compromise can sometimes be the only way in which those important conflicting commitments can be reconciled. We can all sympathise with Malcolm Turnbull's remark a few days ago, 'It's not easy to be Leader of the Opposition'! But we are also justified in expecting that he and all political leaders will attempt to resolve conflicts with principle.

Leadership-as-service is often a matter of empowering others. One admirable contemporary leader has been Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the UN from 1997 to 2006. One of my responsibilities when a Director at the UN was to organise conferences, one of which was the Second World Assembly of Youth held in Portugal in 1999. Kofi Annan was invited to close the Youth Assembly. However, there was a major international crisis a couple of days before he was due to speak and his staff told us that they were advising him not to travel and so we made alternative plans.

Yet despite the pressure he flew overnight from New York. I briefed him on what had been happening, and he was given a thunderous standing ovation by the youth delegates as he entered the hall. The youth were awed and proud to be able to hand to him the resolution about which they had argued, negotiated and on which they had finally agreed during the early hours of the morning and which included their recommendations. Kofi started his speech by explaining that he regarded youth as so vitally important that he was determined to demonstrate his support for their planning. **He emphasised that they were leaders already as well as leaders of tomorrow.** He was serving them by acknowledging the significance of their discussions: he was empowering them by serving them.

It is not inconsistent with Jesus' remarks to aspire to leadership. The issues are about motives and the uses made of leadership positions. Communities and nations require organisers, strategists, teachers, managers, entrepreneurs, innovators and mediators. The question is whether such roles are sought for personal reward and recognition or to serve. It would be an unusual leader who did not have mixed motives, so a continual search for greater purity of motive and forgiveness for self-seeking is essential.

It is a cliché that power is corrupting. Graeme Garrett, a theologian at St Mark's in Canberra described this with more flair in an article entitled 'The devil doesn't change. The devil changes you' and wrote about 'the loss of a sense of any overarching moral or spiritual framework for human life. ... Power calls the shots'. [Garrett, 1999]

The verses which were read earlier from Job are relevant. They are the Lord's answer to the long dialogue between Job and his friends during which Job has complained about divine silence. The Lord implicitly sanctions Job for speaking 'words without knowledge' by questioning him sarcastically. 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ... Who determined its measurements – surely you know!' In the end Job is humbled and says: 'I have uttered what I did not understand ... therefore I despise myself.' Job learns humility and acceptance and later the Lord restores his fortunes.

Arguably there is no greater affront to the lesson God taught Job about humility and accepting his place in God's world than nuclear weapons. There is no greater affront to the recognition of the awesome beauty of God's creation celebrated in the psalm than the evil involved in planning to destroy it. And there is no greater affront to Jesus' command to be a servant than planning to kill millions of people. Yet the very existence of those weapons destroys 'any overarching moral or spiritual framework for human life'.

Judith Wright articulates perfectly the corrupting effect of nuclear weapons on the leaders of nations which have them.

The will to power destroys the power to will.
The weapon made, we cannot help but use it;
it drags us with its own momentum still. [Wright, 1994]

We can be grateful that nuclear weapons have so far not been used since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The World Council of Churches expressed this at its most recent Assembly:

In the nuclear age, God who is slow to anger and abounding in mercy has granted humanity many days of grace. Through the troubled years of the Cold War and into the present time, it has become clear that, in this as in other ways, God has saved us from ourselves. ... If vengeance in daily life is for God (Rom 12:19), surely the vengeance of nuclear holocaust is not for human hands.

Yet to read the national strategies of the nuclear weapons states is an appalling experience because plans for their use are written there. Our responsibility as Christians is to continue the struggle of many churches since 1945 to end the existence of nuclear weapons. We live in a democracy and all of us have some capacity to influence national policy through the letters we write, our visits to our MPs, the rallies we attend and so on.

All people of faith are called to advocate and support complete nuclear disarmament. This could be achieved by negotiation of a nuclear disarmament treaty. Steps have recently been taken which suggest that complete nuclear disarmament may not be a utopian dream. In mid 2008 the Australian Government initiated cooperation with the Japanese Government in establishing the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament and appointing Gareth Evans as Co-Chair. Just over three weeks ago President Obama led the UN Security Council in passing a unanimous decision which included a commitment to effective measures relating to nuclear arms reduction and disarmament, and to negotiation of a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control. That is a complex task. The issue now is to start by taking steps in that direction.

To acknowledge the possibility of a world without nuclear weapons and to work with realistic hope for that end requires a transformation of our world view. Let us pray for that transformation for ourselves, for the communities and nation in which we live and for the world. Such a transformation would be another expression of our attempt to do as Jesus has commanded us, to be a servant to the people around us.

References

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