

Seriously Inefficient Leadership

A sermon on Deuteronomy 17:14-20; 1 Peter 5:1-11 & Matthew 21:12-22 by Nathan Nettleton, 22 November 2020

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Message

In a world dominated by arrogant and exploitative leaders, Jesus models a gentle shepherding leadership that prioritises the reintegration of the broken over the drive for “success” and “efficiency”.

Sermon

The practice of leadership has been big in the news and public conversation this year. Here in Australia, the COVID crisis gave the Prime Minister a platform on which to rehabilitate his image and reputation after his glaring failures of leadership during last summer’s bushfires. The unprecedented levels of cooperation and then the occasional flare-up of tensions between the Prime Minister and the various state premiers has led many to compare leadership their styles and identify what we do and don’t like in various leaders.

This week’s bombshell report from the inquiry into Australian special forces in Afghanistan exposed chilling images of toxic leadership and the ways that such toxic leadership created a deadly, criminal culture within some units of those forces.

And on the international stage we’ve observed the bewildering spectacle of the US presidential elections, and, for something utterly different, the New Zealand parliamentary elections. And then there is the very different model of non-democratic leadership in China and the anxieties about what that might mean for everyone else.

In the church calendar, today is called “Christ the King Sunday”, and the bible readings raise issues about leadership – both what sort of leadership God models, and what sort of leadership God wants to see from those who lead among us.

Although there were some very obvious statements about leadership in our readings, I want to begin with an obscure line from one of them that probably didn’t sound like it was tackling leadership at all.

In our gospel reading we heard the story of Jesus confronting the temple business operations, turning over tables and yelling at the merchants. And then immediately there is this obscure little line that says, “the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.” It seems like it is one of the things the chief priests and religious lawyers immediately object to.

“The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.” What’s the big deal about that? Why does the gospel writer even mention it? It hardly seems relevant to this story, and it’s certainly not one of the bits people remember when they talk about it. What’s it about?

Well, to catch its significance, there is a much older story that you need to know about. For the first seven years of his reign, King David had his capital in the city of Hebron, and when he set out to take Jerusalem from the Jebusites and make it his new capital, the Jebusites were so confident of their defences that they sent a mocking message to David saying, “You will never get in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back.” And the story tells us (2

Samuel 5.6-10) that after capturing Jerusalem, David responded to this insult by imposing a rule that the blind and the lame were never allowed to enter the temple.

So suddenly this little line in Matthew's gospel comes to life doesn't it? Jesus is not just challenging the economic exploitation that is taking place in the temple markets; he is also challenging the systematic exclusion of disadvantaged and disabled people from the centre of religious life and concern. Add to that the emphasis in the next lines on it being young children who were running around shouting his praises, and Jesus defending them against the scolding of the outraged priests, and again you can see the emphasis on Jesus welcoming both the presence and the voices of the little people, the nobodies, the usually disregarded and silenced.

That, right there, is a pretty significant statement about leadership; about what Jesus does with his own leadership, and about what he expects of the leaders who follow in his footsteps and carry on his mission in the world. When he kills off the fig tree with a withering word the next morning, he is illustrating this failure of leadership among the temple establishment. God's word will wither any structures that fail to feed and sustain the ordinary needy people.

The primary biblical metaphor for godly leadership is the image of the shepherd tending a flock. It is an image that appears repeatedly throughout the scriptures, culminating in Jesus being identified as "the good shepherd." In the reading we heard tonight from the first letter of Peter, the Apostle called Jesus the "chief shepherd", and said to the church leaders:

I exhort you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.

One of the parables Jesus tells is of a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind while he goes looking for one lost one. This is what Jesus is doing at the temple – finding the ones who have been lost to the temple, to the faith of Israel, the ones who have been excluded and given no place in the flock. Jesus throws open the gates and brings them in to the flock.

But it is right here that Jesus's shepherding image finds itself running into conflict with most of the leadership theories that are pushed in today's world. Actually, that may not be anything new: it is quite probable that even in Jesus's day, that story of leaving the 99 sheep to go search for the one was deliberately provocative and controversial. What sort of shepherd in his right mind leaves 99 sheep alone and unprotected to go off looking for one that might already be dead. Surely the more responsible and efficient path is to cut your losses and focus on the ones who are staying where they are supposed to be. No diligent accountant would ever approve of Jesus's shepherding model of leadership.

A few weeks ago, at a Baptist Union event that was supposed to be about nourishing pastors, we were subjected to a half hour of "teaching" on leadership from a guy named Paul Scanlon, who from his description of himself is apparently the burned-out and dropped-out ex-pastor of one of the biggest churches in England. And in what was possibly the most anti-Jesus bit of heretical teaching I have ever heard at a Baptist Union event, he told the group of gathered pastors that if we were operating on the pastoral shepherding model of ministry, we were wasting our time and would fail to grow our churches. What was needed, he told us, was

not pastors gently tending flocks, but “leaders” who were focussed on outcomes, productivity, efficiency, growth, and results.

Well Mr Paul “Leadership Guru” Scanlon, whereabouts in your Bible are you finding Jesus or the prophets or apostles championing the importance of efficiency, productivity and church growth? Who the hell do you think you are to come in and tell us that Jesus got it wrong on leadership and that you know better? Bugger off! We’ll stick with Jesus and the apostles, thanks very much.

And if opposing the teaching of Jesus wasn’t enough for him, he broke from his presentation several times to offer us all special, limited-time-only, deals on his video courses which we could have for only £149 instead of the usual 299. After what I’d seen and heard, you couldn’t pay me to watch them! What was it the Apostle Peter said in our reading tonight about leaders not being in it “for sordid gain”?!

I’d like to think that Mr Scanlon could benefit from following the guidance we heard in our reading from Deuteronomy which required of kings of Israel that they personally write out by hand a copy of the Biblical laws, and that they have the copy always to hand and read it every day of their lives, but I’m not sure that even that helps some of these people. We copped an example in his presentation of his ability to twist another of Jesus’s parables inside out to say almost the exact opposite of what Jesus said.

And in case you’re worried that I’m being a bit heavy handed with this guy, wasn’t it just last Sunday that we heard Jesus saying, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! You’re hopeless! Frauds! You’re like manicured grave plots; beneath the lovely surface it’s all rotting bones and worm-eaten flesh”? Just don’t get me started on whoever it was in our Union office who viewed Mr Scanlon’s pre-recorded teaching and decided to poison us with it anyway!

Jesus’s clear preference for the shepherding model of leadership is not good news for those who want to bend the knee at the altar of efficiency, productivity, and growth. Because it is decidedly inefficient. When our chief shepherd sets out to bring home the lost and broken and wayward, and gather them into the one flock, it violates some of the fundamental rules that the leadership and growth experts promote. Trying to bring together people who are very different from one another is not a recipe for rapid growth and popularity.

The overwhelming majority of us prefer the company of people who are a lot like us. Ian made a lovely joke about this at his own expense after prayers one day recently when he described a long phone chat with his son William, and said, “William and I have very similar views on politics and the like, so we can have very pleasant chats, reinforcing how right we are about everything, without anyone disturbing us with the possibility that we might be wrong about anything!” Most of us feel a lot like that; we’re just not as honest or self-aware about it as Ian.

You can see the same thing in the anxiety a lot of us feel about going into the random breakout chat groups after worship. I don’t know who I might end up with. I might have to spend eight awkward minutes with the lost and blind and lame who Jesus welcomed into the temple. I wouldn’t know how to talk with them. Who wants that? The growth gurus tell us that our churches will grow faster if we protect people from the risk of facing experiences like

that. The trouble is that we have to protect ourselves from the teachings of Jesus and the experience of his kingdom culture in the process.

You can see this too in the Donald Trump phenomenon. Most of his predecessors and opponents have at least talked about a vision of trying to unite the deeply divided factions that make up America. Trump has been different. He has been quite up front and honest about his willingness to exploit the divisions rather than heal them. He has made no real attempt to try to win over people who held different values and hopes. He has spoken only of “growing his base”, that is expanding and energising the group of supporters who like each other and agree with each other. And as the growth gurus know, it works. Trump grew his base by more than 5 million votes over the previous election, and if it wasn't for the coronavirus and his failure to control that, he would undoubtedly have won a second term. And he didn't achieve that by asking his base to reach out and make friends with anyone different, with asylum seekers and black-lives-matter demonstrators and bleeding-heart lefties.

So Jesus advocating the shepherding model of leadership is definitely not good news for those who want to bend the knee at the altar of efficiency, productivity, and growth. It produces all the messiness, awkwardness, obscurity, and stumbling inefficiency that marked so many of the parables and teachings of Jesus. It's much more likely to get you crucified than elevated to the pantheon of successful mega-church pastors and leadership gurus.

So how is it good news then?

Well, it's very very good news if you are one of those who the efficiency and growth experts would willingly leave behind as collateral damage in their quest for productivity and results. If you are not one of the “productive” people, the people who can fit in neatly as smooth functioning cogs in their well oiled, draw-a-crowd popularity machine, Jesus's message is very good news. If you're not one of the beautiful successful people whose air-brushed image looks good on the websites and publicity brochures, it's very good news. Jesus is more than willing to leave 99 of those picture perfect people to come and find you and lift you gently to his shoulders and carry you home. Jesus will be standing beside you, introducing you to the others and standing up for you if they are not as welcoming as they should be. That's very good news.

And it is very very good news if you are one of those who wants to be part of the salvation of the world. If you want to see the world saved from the suspicion and hostility and deepening division that is tearing it apart and preventing it from uniting to solve its deepest problems, it is very good news.

Here in Victoria, we are justifiably proud right now of our ability to unite together to defeat the second wave of the pandemic. What if we could overcome even bigger divisions and hostilities in order to unite to defeat homelessness, and domestic violence, and racial injustice, and entrenched poverty, and climate catastrophe? That won't happen by growing a base in an echo-chamber of like-mindedness. It would take a much bigger reconciliation across differences and a much bigger willingness to relinquish personal preferences in favour of unity and cooperation, but we've shown ourselves that it is not impossible. And if we want to see the opposite, we only have to look to the USA to see what happens when difference hardens into partisanship until a society can't even pull together to defeat a viral pandemic, and minds

become so closed that people can die in pain in hospital still bitterly denying the existence of the virus that is killing them.

Jesus's willingness to take the hard and inefficient road of bringing us together despite our differences and teaching us to love one another across anything that would keep us apart, is very very good news for those who want to be part of the revolutionary culture of God that is the only hope of saving the world from the forces of self-destruction that would destroy us all. It is great news for those who want to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

But the bad news for people like me who want to be part of the good news is that we can't just stand up here and blithely condemn the likes of Paul "the leadership guru" Scanlon. We also have to be ready to love them, and listen respectfully to them, and seek to find common ground with them from which to build understanding and gracious partnership. That's hard work, and not nearly as much fun as mocking them, but that's what being part of the solution requires. And if I refuse every opportunity to reach across such divides, I will be failing the Jesus-like leadership call, and showing myself to be a fruitless fig tree withering before the Word of God.