

Sermon - Christ-like leadership

Based on the readings: Hebrews 5.1-10; Mark 10.32-45

The order of Melchizedek

- Today's readings are primarily about leadership, and more specifically about Christian leadership.
- They describe the leadership modelled by Jesus himself - the leadership of the servant King, the leadership of sacrificial love.
- Looking briefly at the passage from the letter to the Hebrews, there is a description of Jesus being appointed by God as a high priest - but one different to the usual Levitical high priest.
- Of the twelve tribes of Israel, the priests were chosen from the tribe of Levi: it was their hereditary role.
- One couldn't become a priest unless one was a Levite, which Jesus was not.
- Nevertheless, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews points out at the beginning of chapter 7:
This 'King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him'; and to him Abraham apportioned 'one-tenth of everything'. His name, in the first place, means 'king of righteousness'; next he is also king of Salem, that is, 'king of peace'. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever.
(Hebrews 7.1-3)
- So Melchizedek was recognised as a priest a couple of generations before Levi was born: his priestly appointment was independent of the Levites, and of a different kind.
- It was not hereditary, but ordained directly by God.
- Nevertheless, the appointment of Jesus to be a priest was not one that was directly beneficial to Jesus himself: it didn't give Jesus any status, or position of power or authority that the general population would have recognised.
- As Hebrews states: *Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered* (Hebrews 5.8)

Teaching deaf disciples

- So, turning to the start of the Gospel reading, we hear Jesus telling his disciples for the third time about the suffering he was going to face when arriving back in Jerusalem.
- You might recall a number of Sundays ago when Jesus was at the furthest point from Jerusalem as he journeyed with his disciples, in chapter 8 (Mark 8.29) he asked them who they considered him to be.
- When Simon Peter acknowledged him as the Messiah, he immediately started teaching them about God's concept of the Messiah - something quite opposite to the common expectation.
- They didn't understand him then, and they didn't understand him when he told them the second time, in chapter 9 (Mark 9.31).
- And now we hear Jesus telling them the third time in chapter 10, and they still do not understand him.
- I think Jesus must have been quite frustrated that they were not listening to him - they were not engaging with what he had to say.
- So when the brothers, James and John, tried to claim positions of status for themselves, Jesus told them that they were trying to act like Gentiles - which they would have found quite confronting, as it would have sounded like an insult.
- He asked them metaphorically if they were prepared to drink the cup of suffering that he had already referred to in his own near future.

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- They were still not engaging with the underlying meaning of his words, and so they blithely answered that they could keep up with him as he fulfilled the role of Messiah - in terms of the popular expectation of the concept.
- I remind you that the popular expectation was that the Messiah was going to re-established the kingdom of Israel, along the lines as it had been under King David - that is, as the political entity of a kingdom state.
- The Messiah was supposed to overthrow the Roman oppressors, and ascend the earthly throne.
- So James and John were keen to assume positions of authority in support of Jesus when he claimed the Davidic throne for himself.
- But Jesus had been teaching the disciples about a different kind of leadership - what we can call Christ's model of leadership, or Christian leadership - from when he had started heading back to Jerusalem.

Seven points of Christ-like leadership*

- I'm going to work through all the points of Christ-like, or Christian, leadership that Jesus had been teaching his closest disciples as they were journeying back.
 - These seven points of leadership are for us also to learn for ourselves, particularly for Christians who are in positions of leadership, or responsibility, such as myself and all the members of the parish council.
 - They are not an exhaustive or overall list of leadership, but are what Mark describes Jesus as having taught on that journey.
 - Each point exhibits an aspect of the sacrificial love that Jesus demonstrated in his life and ministry.
1. When Jesus said: *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'* (Mark 8.34, 38), he was teaching that Christ-like leaders deny self for Jesus' sake and the sake of the gospel, risking and accepting worldly shame.
 2. Through Jesus' transfiguration experience when the disciples *heard a voice from the cloud: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'* (Mark 9.7), they were taught that Christ-like leaders are focused on Jesus and his words above all others.
 3. When the disciples were unable to deliver a man's son from an unclean spirit, and Jesus then did so, *his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' [and] he said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'* (Mark 9.28-29). In this Jesus teaches that Christ-like leaders remain humbly dependent on God's power to do God's work, rather than being dependent on their own power.
 4. After the disciples *had argued with one another about who was the greatest, Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'* Then *he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'* (Mark 9.34-37). In this Jesus teaches that Christ-like leaders do not play the game of competitiveness, one-upmanship, glory grasping, but choose the role of least of all and servant to all.

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5. *Jesus said to James and John, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'* (Mark 10.39-40). In his Jesus teaches that Christ-like leaders relinquish control for who does what and how they do it in the kingdom.
 6. *Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'* (Mark 9.36-37). Later on *People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'* And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10.13-16) In these moments Jesus teaches that Christ-like leaders keep children, and those who are regarded as having the least value and the most need, at the centre of their work, even when it appears distracting.
 7. And from last week's Gospel reading: *Jesus, looking at [the man with many possessions], loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'* Later Jesus said, *'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age ... and in the age to come eternal life.'* (Mark 10.21, 29-30) In this Jesus teaches that Christ-like leaders do not become overburdened by possessions, but receive the gift of the hundredfold promise.
- As I conclude by listing a summary of these, bear in mind that they are generally the opposite of what secular leadership looks like:
 1. Deny self and risk shame;
 2. Prioritise the teaching of Jesus;
 3. Depend on God's strength and power;
 4. Do not seek greatness, but servanthood;
 5. Prioritise God's plans over your own;
 6. Keep those of least value and greatest need at the centre;
 7. Prioritise relationships over material assets.
 - So in his way of sacrificial love, Jesus teaches that *'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'* (Mark 10.43-44)
 - May we be true disciples, take the teaching of Jesus to heart, and follow him in leading our community through practising his way of sacrificial love.

** I am indebted to André Resner, Jr for the seven points of leadership teaching and some of the text used to describe them, from The Lectionary Commentary (© 2001 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co)*