

St Columba, 30 October 2011

All saints Day

Combined service

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Joshua 3:7-17

Matthew 23:1-12

Mentors and models

Introduction

We have now traversed our way through the books of the Torah – albeit briefly, concluding with the death of Moses at the end of the book of Deuteronomy and the passing on of the leadership mantle to Joshua. Today we are embarking on the following section of the Bible, which is commonly known as ‘the Prophets’. ‘Joshua’ is the first book, thought to be written about 1000 BCE. Its main focus is the establishment of the nation Israel in the land promised to Abraham. This ‘establishment’ of the people in the land of Canaan includes reminders of the covenant promises between God and the people and instructions – visions and modelling – of what life could be like if they remember to live in ways that honour the covenant and God’s love and dream for humanity. A key feature is introducing the ‘Ark of the covenant’ – a symbol to remind the people that the promises of the covenant travel with them wherever they are. Priests become important for the first time, as the roles of leadership are shared more widely, and ritual becomes more important as the nation moves into a more structured life.

Today the Matthew reading provides us with insight into what the leadership of the Jewish community was like. The writer lets us know that Jesus has three objections to the way the Pharisees are conducting their leadership responsibilities and that he is at pains to

point these out to his disciples, the ones to whom he will pass his own leadership mantle, in the hope that they will learn and be different. Jesus points to the expectation that

- Leaders will practice what they preach – walk the talk in other words
- They will be open and encouraging in their leadership – enabling, life-giving, and offering hope
- They will not expect adulation and public acknowledgement.

The tension between Jesus and his adversaries is racked up.

One of the issues facing the education and development of our young people is the availability of models.

I remember a conversation, a number of years ago now, with people working in south Auckland. The wisdom of their experience suggested that one of the difficulties that they faced, in trying to encourage and support the educational achievement and professional aspirations of youngsters, was the lack of people with whom the young people could identify who had achieved well at school and gone on the tertiary education or to business. This lack of models with whom to identify had resulted in an inability in many young people to imagine a future other than the life they were currently living with its various combinations of deprivation: lack of stable two parent family, the violence, the abuse, the lack of secure employment that returned an adequate financial return, non-achievement at school ... and the other indicators of poverty and social inequality that we are familiar with.

And then there is the other extreme, where all the benefits of economic security and social location are present - but somehow it still does not translate into the development of

adults who see making a positive social contribution to the wellbeing of their community a priority for their endeavours. I would venture to suggest a consideration of role models again – along with a wondering who they are looking to as role models and mentors... and even daring to ask what values, vision and aspirations are they seeing to guide their choices – what entitlements do they imagine are theirs!

Whatever our social location, whatever the circumstances of our life, our ability to imagine something different is possible has the potential to offer us hope and freedom!

This message of hope and freedom is what lies at the heart of the gospel, the good news of God, as modelled and preached by Jesus. An invitation to imagine something different is set before the people, and set before us too as we consider the stories of those who have dreamed and hoped before us.

Hope and freedom is at the heart of the stories we have been following from the Hebrew Scriptures over these past weeks, including today's story from Joshua. You will recall that last week the people had come to the end of their 40 years journey wandering around *in the wilderness* and reached the edge of the River Jordan... Moses had been their leader during this period of wandering, but he was not to be the one to lead them into this new phase. He dies at a great age and Joshua assumes the leadership role. This is not unexpected of course, Moses had been his mentor. Moses had been preparing him for the task that he now inherits. So this people who, as the story goes, had a generation before escaped slavery in Egypt by crossing the Reed Sea, were now poised to walk through the waters of the Jordan River and commence a new phase in their history.

The story is full of parallels and rituals and signs all pointing toward a people now confident in who they are, their political

and religious frameworks well established and their aspirations and leadership set out in structures and liturgical ritual.

One thing is clear from this part of the story - the importance of mentoring carefully those who are to assume leadership... There was no *'leaving to chance'* that there was a vision strong enough, and well established in the collective imagination, to enliven the people and to hold a sense of communal responsibility strong enough to ensure they would continue to embody values of mutual responsibility for each other's well-being. A leader was prepared, mentored, and established in the role.

We know this went astray over time. Mathew's reporting of Jesus having another go at the trying to ensure his friends and disciples got a hold of the purpose of leadership and were disabused of any sense of entitlement they might harbour, points to this! It is not that the roles identified - rabbi, instructor, leader and the like, were not important and required, they were (and still are), rather it was the sense of entitlement and expectation of superior ranking (that some thought went with them) that was not required.

Today, in the face of the call to close the wealth/poverty gap and to work for the protection and security of our children,

- we need desperately need visionary leaders, ethical leaders, leaders who can empower the dream that it is possible to be a more caring and kindly society,
- and we all need to be able to imagine that we can play our part in helping the world become a more peaceful and safe place (perhaps be one of these leaders!)

We need to be confident that that there will be available to us the resources of education and mentoring we need to help us make our contribution whatever we imagine that to be – as teacher, mother, doctor, priest, builder, community worker, economist, psychologist... We all need role models, mentors and leaders to enliven our

imagination and to remind us of what is possible, and to ensure the resources for wellbeing are available.

On All Saints Day casting our minds over the people in our lives who have helped imagine something different, people who have offered us a vision of our own potential, people who have kept a live a hope in difficult times that things will change are worth remembering. They are the ordinary saints who have extra-ordinary impact on who we are and who we aspire to become.

Today I am remembering two very different people: One a Harvard professor with whom I studied many years ago: she was for me a model of a smart, competent woman – unafraid to challenge the status quo with respect to accepted learning and interpretation and the role of women. The other a person who has struggled with severe physical and emotional trauma, with economic deprivation as an added complication: she finds delight in the smallest and most insignificant things ... spending time with her helps me notice what I would otherwise miss and revalue what is important in life. These people are everyday saints for me

Who holds a vision of freedom and hope for you?

Who models for you possibilities of what you might yet become?

I encourage you to think of these people this week with thankfulness that their lives have touched your life - and also to wonder how you impact the lives of the people you know.

