

## **Sermon October 20, 2024**

### **Servant Leadership**

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated. Over the last couple of weeks, we have been looking at the message of social justice that is a predominant theme in the Gospel of Mark and a central message of Christ's ministry. At its core, social justice is about the fair treatment of all individuals and social groups within a state or society. It is about the equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. It is about respecting and protecting human rights. As Jesus teaches and preaches about social justice, he is also continually challenging the authority of the Jewish priests and the Roman Empire.

In today's Gospel reading from Mark, it is an exchange between Jesus, James, and John that gives us a much deeper insight into what Jesus sees as appropriate authority as it has been given to him by God. We know from history that the authority of the Roman Empire was grounded in violence or threats of violence and coercion. Jesus is opposed to this type of authority because it is morally wrong to engage in violence, and to threaten people. The Roman concept of power hinges on the idea that only a few can hold authority and that everyone else must be subject to that authority, creating a major inequity of the distribution of power. But the Roman approach to authority is also wrong because it takes away from the God-given gift of free will. Those who made choices in line with their consciences often found themselves as recipients of violence at the hands of the Roman Empire, and we know that Jesus is on the road to such a fate with the crucifixion. Jesus is also taking a stand against the traditional authority of the Jewish priesthood which represented a kind of authority that was handed down to them because they continued to replicate things the way that they thought they had always been done. This is a major sticking point for Jesus because the Jewish community has become so wrapped up in trying to keep to the letter of the Law of Moses that they cannot see that the spirit of the Law has become incredibly distorted. The Law of Moses, or the 10 Commandments, was intended to give people strong guidelines for their lives that were intended to keep them in

right relationship with God. What happened over time was that the Jewish priesthood had warped the spirit of the Law to make it effectively right to disadvantage certain members of society and marginalize those who were thought to be less worthy. There is no doubt that the Chief Priests enjoyed enormous privileges in relation to the rest of the Jewish community and that they had a vested interest in keeping it that way; even if that meant conspiring to a degree with the Romans. There was a level of corruption there that Jesus took a very strong position against. We will see this play out quite famously in the Gospel story in which Jesus challenges the money-changers and the merchants in the Temple during Holy Week.

But in today's episode from Mark 10, Jesus is approached by the brothers James and John who essentially ask him for a favour. They want Jesus to share what they perceive to be his glory, with one of them appointed to be his "right hand man" and the other appointed to be his "left hand man". When the other disciples hear this, they get angry because they feel that James and John are asking to be Christ's favourites and to be given a kind of power that the others would not have. Jesus reminds them that it is God alone who can share divine glory and power which is quite different from human glory and power. Jesus goes on to again foreshadow his own death, and of course the disciples have no idea what he is talking about. He then describes the kind of leadership that he has been called to and says to them, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." Jesus is very committed to the idea of serving because he believes that this is also the only way lead a movement that is about social justice.

What Jesus is talking about here is a very different kind of authority that stems from a very different kind of leadership. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we call this *servant leadership*. When I watched the coronation of King Charles in May of 2023, I thought it was very interesting that he chose a variation on this same Bible verse when he said, "In the name of Christ and after his example, I come not be served but to serve." Queen Elizabeth II made a similar statement on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday broadcast when she said that she would devote her whole life to the service of her people. Those who choose servant leadership as the model that governs their personal and professional lives seek to influence others through service

and through example. We see this again with Jesus during Holy Week when he washes the feet of the disciples. His power and his authority come from his service to others and from his example. This is how he gains their respect and how he influences people, allowing them to use their own free will in the process. He never threatens or coerces people into following him; instead, Jesus invites them to journey with him.

When we take a closer look at servant leadership, we know that it includes several other aspects. Firstly, servant leaders have a strong commitment to the growth of other people. One of the best tests to determine if someone is a servant leader is to ask: “Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?” We know that Jesus most certainly geared his ministry towards helping others to grow in their faith, in their relationships with God, but also in becoming much more aware of the importance of social justice and the need to care for those in society who are marginalized or even forgotten. It is interesting to note that, in all 4 Gospels, there are several stories of Jesus tending to the one person who is suffering on the sidelines while the disciples always seem to get caught up in the excitement of being at the centre of the crowds – a bit like rock stars. Two weeks ago, we had the example of Jesus allowing children to come to him for blessings. Children had no status in the society of that time, and the disciples were busy pushing them away. But Jesus says and does the opposite. He said to the disciples, “Let the children come to me.” In other stories, we hear of Jesus stopping to talk to and heal the sick, the lonely, the poor, and the fearful – those who have no economic, social, or political power. He behaves in a way that is counter-cultural because he saw a real value in every person as a child of God, regardless of their status in society.

Other qualities that Jesus had as a servant leader included his abilities to listen and to empathize with people’s troubles. He was also a force for healing. We know that he was able to perform miracles that included physical healing for the blind, the deaf, the lame, the lepers, and the sick. We know that he also brought Gyros’ daughter back from the dead and that he did the same for Lazarus. But Jesus was also about bringing healing to broken

hearts and to broken spirits. He had a dream for a much richer, deeper relationship between God and mankind and he used his 3-year ministry to try to bring that about. And, Jesus was very committed to the idea of building community. These are all qualities and actions that contributed to making him a servant leader.

When we think about the life of the Church and about what we are called to do and to be in our communities, we need to reflect on the model of servant leadership that Jesus left us. I think it is interesting that our diocese is very committed to working with those who are to be ordained to take on this type of leadership. Thankfully, we have moved away from a model where people who wear clergy shirts and collars are given authority and power within churches and within society simply because they are ordained. That model got the broader Church into a lot of trouble because it led to abuses of power and abuses of people. Clergy are not to be the “sage on the stage”, or the centre of church life. Clergy are meant to gain their authority and respect through leading by example and through the building up of other people. They are to serve rather than to be served. Within ACPC, we have 3 people who are currently discerning a call to ordained ministry and we are so thankful for that. Sometimes I am asked what we can do to support Deborah, Loretta, and Jason as they move through this process. When we look at this morning’s Gospel message, I think that the best thing that we can do is to support them in continuing to grow as servant leaders because that is what Jesus is calling them and us to do. Amen.