
But it Shall Not be So with You

Mark 10.35-45

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 18, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

When I was growing up, America was a faraway place made up of four states – California, Texas, Florida, and New York. I knew the word Watergate and I knew it meant something very sad that my American godfather didn't want to talk about. I knew the word Vietnam and I knew he didn't much want to talk about that either. I remember a man with a very big smile was elected president. No one was sure if that might mean some kind of new start for America, although I got the impression it was certainly a big day for peanuts. But one very vivid memory is of President Carter late in his presidency going for a jog with his aides and being overcome by some kind of heat exhaustion. From 3000 miles away it felt like America could cope with crooked politicians and a war that ran into the sand but it couldn't somehow deal with a weak leader.

Very little has changed in 30 years. We can't agree on what's wrong and we aren't at all sure where we should be going, but we all know we need a great leader. If there's one thing every high school senior knows they must put on their application to Duke, it's their astonishing record of leadership. "While still in the womb I spearheaded the movement for my twin and me to enter the birth canal." "While still in nursery I organized the toddlers to campaign for recyclable diapers." "While in first grade I represented my class at the school board showdown on whether to move to 2% milk at snack time." "When I was in fourth grade I went on a Girl Scout expedition to the planet Jupiter, and devised a system by which children could share oxygen on the return journey to save on baggage weight." "When I was in eighth grade I scythed deep into the Amazonian jungle, and found a previously unknown tribe. I learned their language, taught them how to play golf, and helped them find a sustainable water supply."

If we believe our own publicity, Duke is a factory for manufacturing leaders. We don't ask too much about what other institutions do, but presumably someone out there must be manufacturing followers: otherwise things are going to get a little unbalanced, to say the least. The trouble is, while we assume leadership is the answer to everything, we are extremely skeptical about leaders themselves. We're always alert to ways in which leaders may simply be using the people or organization they lead to gain some nefarious benefit for themselves – a bloated salary, some kind of gravy-train vacation perk, an opportunity to foster some possibly illegal business venture, or (and now I speak in hushed tones) the most highly-prized commodities in corporate life: an office with windows and a convenient parking space. We train our young people to be extremely ambitious, but we point them towards roles in which we know they will inevitably attract suspicion, cynicism and outright hostility.

Jesus is well aware of the problem. His close friends James and John have more than half an eye on the perks and the public acclaim. They've already selected their heavenly parking spots and tenured offices. Jesus tells them they've lost the plot. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your *servant*, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be *slave of all*." So where does that put our obsession with leadership? How can you be a ruler and a slave at the same time? That's the question I want to examine today.

It's worth setting out what being a leader involves in a bit of detail, to get a sense of what Jesus is challenging and what he's affirming. To be a leader is to be expected to do four things. I'd like you to imagine four points of a square.

At the top left of the square is the role of spokesperson. This is someone who's good with words. They are a figurehead who can talk with people outside an organization to explain what it is and inspire interest and trust in what it does. At the same time they use words to motivate and instruct those within the organization about where they are going and how they may best get there. When outsiders think of the organization it's the spokesperson who gives it an immediately identifiable human face. When you think of civil rights you think of Martin Luther King Jr., when you think of charitable work among the poor you think of Mother Teresa, when you think of the anti-Apartheid struggle you think of Nelson Mandela, because these are the people who give outsiders a human face through which to comprehend complex and diverse movements.

Then at the top right of the square is the role of the chair. The chair is the one who ensures the rules are kept, that deadlines are met, that obligations are carried out, that the organization fulfills its mission, that everyone does their job properly, that each person gets paid, and the right people are hired, and the noisy don't dominate and the shy don't evaporate. If the spokesperson is about inspiration, the chair is about permanence and trust. The person in charge often carries responsibility for a lot of people's welfare and institutional capital, let alone the money side of things, and you want a chair to be a safe and competent pair of hands. In short, the chair is the grown-up. However much you may admire someone, if they're always losing checks or forgetting appointments or constantly late for meetings they may be a charismatic presence but you're not going to want them in charge of your organization for long.

At the bottom left of the square is the role of facilitator. If the chair leads from the front, the facilitator leads from the back. The facilitator is like the athletics coach, constantly going round the team having a quiet word with each one, working out how to get the best out of them all and how to get the right combinations to release the energy in the group. This is the person who remembers everyone's birthday and organizes terrific leaving parties, who turns conflict into an opportunity for growth, treats crisis as an invitation to creativity, and sees no mistakes or failures, only bonding moments and learning experiences. If the chair makes you feel everything's under control, the facilitator makes you feel you're having a good time. You didn't realize you were dying to dress up as dinosaurs and have a staff night out at the all-you-can-eat ice cream parlor but afterwards you all said it was great to let your hair down and we should do it again.

And at the bottom right of the square is the role of the epitome. This is the person who represents all that's good about an organization. They try the hardest, they wake at night thinking about crucial details, their actions perfectly embody everything the institution stands for. If the spokesperson is all about words, the epitome is all about deeds. They may not be fantastically articulate, but when you prick them, they bleed with the lifeblood of the organization they serve. They're loyal, dogged, unwavering, and faithful. They're the captain who goes down with the ship. If they break with or fall short of the organization's high standards it feels catastrophic, because they somehow crystallize the institution's moral credibility. When people ask the leader How much are you paid? or Where do your children go to school? or What kind of car do you drive?, they may just be being nosy, but they may well be asking, "Just what exactly does this institution really stand for?"

We expect our leaders to be outstanding in all of these roles. Of course this is a fantasy. No one is outstanding in all these roles. Wise leaders know where they are weak and harness the gifts and qualities of others to compensate for their own shortcomings. In fact it's often bad for an organization to have a super-competent leader, because nothing grows in the shade of a great tree, and when the leader leaves or dies the grief can be paralyzing. That's the story of the demise of a thousand family businesses, when the great founder-patriarch dies having never given his children a chance to run things without his suffocating micro-management.

All four dimensions of leadership have their distortions and temptations. The spokesperson may be a dilettante who just loves the flattery and attention of being in the public eye. The chair may be greedy for the sense of being in control of other people's lives and be inclined to take advantage of the perks and the privileges of power. The facilitator may be seeking a perpetual high of life as a non-stop party, and be overcompensating for shortcomings in their own family structure or close relationships. The epitome may be so wrapped up in the organization that they come to feel it's an extension of their own personality or family and may refuse to retire or be obstructive of change.

But Jesus is concerned about tyranny and making a show of leadership. He's putting the spotlight on leaders who are *using* their organizations or kingdoms for some purpose beyond the institution itself, usually personal aggrandizement or gratification. It seems this is the crucial point. The leader that Jesus applauds *has no ambition or goal beyond the organization they are leading* – it's not a source of wealth or vehicle for power or a platform for acclaim. It's an end in itself. That's why he uses the language of slavery. To us the word "slave" is profoundly jarring, even abhorrent – not just in the history of the South but in contemporary crimes such as human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Jesus isn't condoning any of these things. He wants us to imagine choosing to have no outlet for our energies than to see others flourish. The kind of slavery Jesus means isn't a condition imposed on you by a tyrant. It's an attitude you *yourself* choose as a form of discipleship, as a way of saying "I

have no goal in life beyond bringing out the best in others.” Jesus doesn’t force us to be his slaves. He sets us free to choose to be slaves of all.

Some years ago I was closely involved in a large-scale community-led economic redevelopment program. I poured a great number of hours into the process of shaping a plan, gaining funding, establishing a company and trying to bring more jobs, better education and better health to the neighborhood. Four or five years into the process, I found myself staying late after an evening meeting, having a disagreement with one of the most prominent neighborhood leaders. I was worn out and frustrated, and I said to her, “Why d’you think I’m *involved* in this process? Why d’you think I’ve been involved all *along*?” She said, without blinking, “I assume it’s for the sake of your career.” I was stunned. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. I thought, “I live here, I don’t live anywhere else. I’ve put a mountain of hours into this program. What do I have to do to show you I care about this place? And if you think this is the kind of neighborhood where career-hungry clergy spend their thirties, I’ve got news for you.” But I didn’t say it.

It hurt so much I still remember it seven years later. But the trouble is, in an important way she was right. Not about the career, I hope. But she was really saying you’ll never be the right leader for this community because your identity isn’t sufficiently tied up in it. An epitome is someone who has no real aspirations beyond the organization. A facilitator is someone who has no joy in life beyond making everyone in the institution flourish. She was saying she didn’t see those things in me. Sure, I could be a spokesperson between the high ups in City Hall and the local leaders, between the suits and the streets. And sure, I could chair meetings and keep us within the rules. But I was always going to be seeking my identity beyond and outside. She put her finger on that, while I refused to see it.

Jesus is saying to be a leader like him, you need to share some characteristics with a slave. A slave has no identity that isn’t wrapped up in their owner. A slave has no ability to flourish that isn’t about the flourishing of others. Not just others further up the hierarchy, but others further down the hierarchy. These are the characteristics of what I’ve been calling the epitome and the facilitator. Is Jesus saying Christian leadership doesn’t require the gifts of the chair and the spokesperson? No, I don’t think so. Not all spokespersons and chairs tyrannize and lord it over people. The point is, that *these are the areas where the most temptation lies*. And the best way to avoid the temptations latent in every leadership position are to be absolutely certain you’re aiming to be an epitome and a facilitator. Those are roles in which it’s very hard to accumulate benefit for yourself that the organization never receives. These are inherently servant roles, where it’s impossible for you to gain unless everyone else gains at the same time. Yes, absolutely be a spokesperson and a chair: these roles are integral to leadership and no organization can run without them. But do so in a way that enables you always to remain an epitome who embodies what the organization is all about and a facilitator who brings out the best in everyone else. Concentrating on those roles is the best way, maybe the only way, to avoid the pitfalls of leadership.

And that means this isn’t just a conversation about chief executives in leather-seated limousines. Not everyone gets to be the chair, and not everyone’s a good fit to be the visible spokesperson. But everyone can be the epitome of the organization they believe in, and everyone can spend their life bringing out the best in those around them. Jesus’ final remarks identify himself – but they also challenge us. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to *give his life* a ransom for many.” We all have to die sooner or later. Jesus tells us what he’s going to die for. He’s going to die because he epitomizes the kingdom he proclaims, and he’s going to die to set people free. That’s it. Just those two desires. He calls himself a slave because he has no desire beyond those two desires, no notion of personal benefit beyond the salvation of the world.

Do you have no desire beyond those two desires? Is that what *you* are going to die for? If so, you’re what Jesus calls a leader. You’re just the kind of leader Jesus wants.