

6 Pentecost 21
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Today's readings are striking - striking in that if I could have chosen readings for my first Sunday back after being gone for three months then certainly the one from Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi would have been one of them! And the Old Testament reading, and the Gospel provide a good 'supporting cast', as it were - they all share in a theme which is central to the study I've been doing: leadership.

Actually, to be precise, leadership AND authority - the two go hand in hand.

In the Old Testament Moses leadership is being questioned because he's failed to do what all good leaders should do: provide sustenance for the people who follow him. As the story plays out it becomes apparent that Moses is able to recognize those places where he is simply unable to fulfil a leaders' role alone. He begs God for help and God confers a blessing on Moses such that Moses is able to do that which was, before, impossible for him - provide water for the people.

In the gospel we're watching a struggle for religious leadership. Who can rightfully claim to represent Judaism? Is it the Institutional leadership, described by Matthew as "the Temple authorities, the Chief Priests, and the elders of the people", or is it the person who clearly represents a challenge to that institutional authority - Jesus?

The institutional leaders ask a question that we think we understand: "by what authority?" There are sorts of authority we recognize: legal authority - like that of a policeman; or traditional authority - I have traditional authority, conferred by an institution; or professional authority - like a medical doctor when talking about health matters.

But none of those sorts of authority were what the Institutional leaders were thinking of when they asked the question. In the First Century the social standing of the speaker was absolutely central to any question of authority - and what was behind the Jewish leaders' question was a very public insinuation - "Jesus, you don't have the right to do what you're doing because you come from the wrong social class: carpenters don't have the social standing to teach about the scriptures."

Or to lead - leadership in the first century was determined by social standing, and social standing was determined by birth. If you were born into a wealthy and prominent family you could be a leader. If you were not, then you could not. Within that cultural elite, of course, authority and leadership were simply assumed.

In the twenty first century in North America the social standing of a preacher wouldn't be the factor that determines authority to preach - or to lead; quite the reverse, in fact. What's that phrase? "Log cabin to White House"?

Jesus' response is with his usual brilliance. His authority, he says, is confirmed by his faithful actions.

For us, today, the question of authority and leadership - who has it and who doesn't, who's entitled to it and who isn't - the question of authority and authority's an important and lively one. That's why the most important reading for us as the Church is the Epistle - is in Paul's words to the Philippian church.

Remember - Paul is writing to a community that had the same cultural expectations and beliefs as that of the Jerusalem of the gospel reading: that leadership was autocratic, elitist, patriarchal, honor-based, and not subject to being shared outside of that narrow group.

In addition, though, Philippi - like every city where Paul founded a Christian community - was a center of Roman Administration. So the leadership of the city of Philippi was also Imperial, Roman and, apparently, tyrannical.

We actually know quite a lot about the Philippian Christians. It was a fairly large church, and was socially very diverse with significant numbers from the social elites. From what Paul says it's pretty clear that the community had experienced substantial conflict between Jesus' call for humble service and the Philippians' own cultural value of pursuing a prominent and pre-eminent place in their cultural circle.

Paul, in response, offers the leaders of the Philippian church a different model of leadership, expressed in what is probably the earliest Christian hymn we have - something that probably dated from the first generation of followers of Jesus - to perhaps 55 A. D. The main way the Early Church did its theology and created its community was through hymns like this one - so what's contained in it is vital in understanding how the Early Church understood itself and its leadership:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness....he humbled himself....became obedient unto death—even death on a cross.”

Self-emptying, servant-hood, humility, obedience - these are different values than those in place in Philippi - or for that matter, for those in place in our culture today. “Imitate Christ in this way”, says Paul, “honor Jesus, not the emperor”. This is an alternate vision of how to live and how to lead for all of us, and a reversal of what is commonly viewed as authority and leadership today.

But Paul isn't just talking about leadership - he's talking about the Christian life in general. If leadership, he says, should look like this, so should everything else we do.

So Paul is calling for the transformation of people's lives at the most basic human level. Much of what Paul writes elsewhere - especially when he talks about the metaphor of the Body of Christ, and the central role of baptism in authoring all ministry - is based on this vision of imitating Christ.

I think we should have no illusions that about this vision. It was a dangerous story to tell in Roman Philippi because it was subverting long-held understandings of human interaction and it will, I suspect, come as no surprise to you to remember that both Paul and the Philippian church suffered persecution there (Philippians 1:30).

It's also a difficult story to tell today, especially, for instance, when it comes to political leadership of all sorts. As one writer has said:

We are inundated with narratives which promise life found [by exercising] superior force, in acquiring the best looks, the best bank accounts, the best weapons, the best 'stuff'. We are told that life is secured by our winning – socially, economically, politically, religiously – and everyone else losing. There is little room for the claim that the obedient death and resurrection of Jesus is the story of God's ultimate loving victory, the defining reality for all the world."

But this **is** our vision: a vision of hope not just for leadership in particular, but for all human living; a vision that is humane, empowering, compassionate, humble, and, ultimately, filled with love.

May it be ours.