

“Servant Leadership” - a sermon based on Matthew 23:1-14 preached at Knox Church

Dunedin on 2 November 2014 by Kerry Enright in a service that included the Commissioning of the Knox Church Council

“You have one teacher and you are all students. You have one Father, the one in heaven. You have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant.”

Last week on the news was the story of the Lower Hutt man who forgave his son’s murderers. In the courtroom, during the victim impact report, Lafeta Matalasi stood and looked towards the people who had murdered his son and said, “I forgive you.” As far as I can tell there was nothing in the circumstances that would lead Lafeta to do that. His son left behind a partner and two small children. The men who murdered were members of a gang and photos portrayed them as scary with one having facial tattoos that were not of the usual kind. They were reported as showing no sign of regret, remorse or repentance. And all this happened in a society that seems determined to punish rather than rehabilitate such people. As far as I can tell, only in the television account of the story was Lafeta’s faith mentioned, in passing, that he was led to do this as a Christian. Whatever it was, it was counter-cultural, counter-intuitive, and unusual.

How might we describe what happened in court that day? What led Lafeta to do what he did?

- Was there a teacher present guiding Lafeta’s living?
- Was there a parent present nurturing Lafeta toward life at its most free?
- Was there an instructor present offering Lafeta direction?
- Was there a servant present helping Lafeta to serve God and others?

“You have one teacher and you are all students. You have one Father, the one in heaven. You have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant”

I believe Christ was present in that court room - Christ as teacher, parent, instructor, servant.

For Christ teaches still, instructs still, loves as a parent still, serves still, distinct from what is heard and taught and promoted in the society around us.

And we are students, apprentices, followers, disciples – always. Ever before we take up any other role, any responsibility, any task, our first calling is to listen, to learn, to practise, to follow – our first calling is discipleship.

I have been heartened by what Knox people have told me about how they listen to Christ.

- There are people who every day light a candle in their home and spend time in meditation, in prayer, who read the Bible, often the readings for Sunday.
- There are people who have a particular part of the house given over to prayer and reflection, or they have an icon, and they go to that place at some time every day to centre their lives – some also have a place outside where they do the same when it is fine.
- There are people who at the beginning of every day offer the day to God and at the end of the day thank God for the day they have had.

- There are people who pray the prayer in our bulletin, morning and night.
- There are people who make use of the internet, who receive a daily prayer by email from Sojourners or some other group.
- There are people who read the Bible and meditate on it several times a week, sometimes using a study book.
- There are people who watch teachers and preachers on the internet.
- There are people who use books of meditations and studies and prayer.
- There are people who just spend time with Jesus, as they put it.

These are some of the ways Knox people experience Christ teaching still, instructing still, parenting still - I look forward to hearing about more of how we do it in the months ahead.

These practices are fundamental to living a spirited life. Without them we drift, we get tossed to and fro, and we come only to reflect the world around us. There is no genuine newness, no genuine freedom, no radical otherness, just the same but a bit better, and the future becomes a continuation of the past.

The instructor, the teacher, the parent, the servant is offering people a new world, a new way of being, a substantially different vision, creation as it is meant to be, and is pulling us into that new world, that heaven, that kingdom of God – word by word, loving act by loving act, step by step – and we accept that invitation through prayer and meditation and Bible and reflection, in community.

In community we encourage each other in listening, studying, practising, serving – in being disciples.

Mandela said that it was the long time he spent alone which required him to deepen his capacity to attend, to notice, to listen, to watch, that enabled him to become the person he was.

People writing about leadership keep emphasising the importance of listening first, serving first.

Robert Greenleaf – the servant leader is servant first.

Margaret Wheatley – “We need to move from the leader as hero, to the leader as host. Can we be as welcoming, congenial, and invitational to the people who work with us as we would be if they were our guests at a party? Can we think of the leader as a convenor of people? I am realising that we can’t do that if we don’t have a fundamental and unshakeable faith in people. You can’t turn over power to people who don’t trust. It just doesn’t happen If you don’t have faith in people, you can’t be a servant. I mean, what are you serving? If you’re not serving human goodness, you can’t be a servant. For me it’s just that simple.”

The Church is called to embody this way of being. Last Sunday was Reformation Sunday.

One outcome of the reformation was an emphasis on collaborative leadership. The minister or the elder or the church councillor is no more important than anyone else. They have a role to perform – and most of all, that role requires them to listen, to discern, to embody, and to encourage every person who might associate with Knox, in some way, to do the same.

They are to enable people to flourish, as Jesus enabled people to flourish.

Greenleaf says this is the test of leadership – do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more likely themselves to become servants?

This is the test of all leadership, including in the Church. It is not about command and control. It is about actively, thoughtfully, wisely, making it safe for others, creating space for people to flourish, creating opportunities for people to be creative, serving so others can serve, eliciting what is best in people.

Today is the Sunday after All Saints Day, a day we remember those who have died, and whose lives continue to influence us. Consider for a moment the person who has most influenced your life for good. What was it about them? And what in them have you sought to make your own, in your way, as you exercise leadership?

Contemplate them for a moment.

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