

In the book I have recommended for Lent reading, *Lent with the Beloved Disciple*, written by Bishop Michael Marshall, you will find a treasury of thoughtful and interesting angles taken on the events of Holy Week and Easter, based on the narrative and the reflections offered in the Gospel of Saint John.

While these addresses will use the book as their starting point, I don't intend to repeat what you can already read, but to take Bishop Michael as a springboard for my own thoughts, rooted as much in the situation of this priest, in this church, in this day, just as the reflections of Bishop Michael are carefully founded in the context and perceptions of the world John's gospel was originally written for.

That gives me plenty of scope, especially with a talk that takes the title *From a Different Perspective!* And in a context today where there seems to be a crisis of leadership both in the Church and in the world, Bishop Michael's masterly exposition of the servant leadership of Jesus – founded on the model of the Temple Priesthood, and bringing it to its fulfilment – offers a good starting point.

There are those today who wish we hadn't started to talk about leadership at all – certainly in the Church – and who hanker after a simpler time when bishops were seldom seen and clergy had time to say their prayers, read widely, pursue diverse hobbies, and also turn up at the doorstep with a frequency for most people found in the memory rather in the historical reality. A time when they were just there and didn't fret about being leaders!

And there is some basis for that. Effective leadership was on the agenda for Caiaphas, the High Priest who stated that it was expedient for one man (Jesus) to die for the people. His view of his task as High Priest was to make sure he did what was needed to retain the religious identity of the people, and to safeguard

the Temple worship that could have been threatened if the Roman occupiers thought there was a religious threat to their rule and to their collection of taxes. Yet if Jesus was the man who died so that the people could retain these things, he died in vain, as we know the Temple was razed to the ground a few short years after the death of Jesus in 70 AD.

There is a marked contrast between the High Priest whose principal job was to go into the Holy of Holies once a year to humble himself on behalf of the people, and that later version, who could hold the power of life and death, and influence things even beyond the reluctance of the Roman Governor Pilate so that Jesus finally met his fate – for the people, but not in the way that the High Priest had been thinking.

The original core role of the High Priest was a very simple and humble one – probably not the sort of thing that people would queue up for or apply for in great number, which may go some way to explaining why it was part of the hereditary Temple priesthood and was allocated to individuals on a Buggins Turn basis. But by the time of Jesus, the High Priest was at the top of a tree, in charge of a hierarchy which had existed long enough to develop a network of slippery poles.

Now I would say it's lazy thinking to suggest that all hierarchies are bad – in an organisation there have to be people who make the final decisions on behalf of all, or there would be utter chaos – and to go back to the original example, if all the people went into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement the whole process would last far too long. But for human beings in a hierarchy the relationships of service can so easily become relationships of power. This happens not just with individuals, but also in churches and organisations where

committees and groups of deacons, elders, governors, and so on have that representative power, they all too easily find themselves misusing it.

This is the reason why most states which call themselves democratic have what is called a 'balance of powers', and why the episcopal powers of many Anglican churches are balanced out (in theory) by a synodical structure. We can see all too easily what types of abuses – of power and of people – can take place where those in power are not held accountable in such a way.

The High Priest was – as Michael Marshall points out – reminded of his service of both God and people by the humble and universal symbols of the table of the bread offering and the washing of hands and feet – things integral to everyday life, and doubly important for someone on a journey when arriving at and leaving from a *caravanserai* – a staging post or resting place along the way.

This type of service is of course something many of the disciples still don't understand, and that is a cause of frustration to Jesus. Peter initially won't have his feet washed; and they all argue about who will be the most important in the Kingdom. The one who was humbler yet, even to accepting death, was really a step too far for them.

I still recall reading a report not very long ago about a meeting of the Bishops of the Church of England, where they proudly related to the rest of us that they had been learning humility by washing each others' feet. There could not be anything less in keeping with this sense of service and with their particular sharing in the role of Christ the High Priest. Jesus didn't wash the feet of the Father and the Holy Spirit – it wasn't something to be kept 'in the family' so to speak. No – Jesus washed the feet of those he came to serve, and they were to wash not only each others' feet but the feet of all those others whom he also

came to serve. I would have been inspired if they had gone out of their cossetted surroundings to wash the feet of the poor, the imprisoned, the homeless – and I ended up finding just that inspiration in the prophetic actions of Pope Francis, who makes a point of washing the feet of such people on Maundy Thursday. Easily dismissed as a stunt, but what a powerful witness and what effective leadership! The Church of England bishops were, in their defence, working on the reconciliation of opposing views among themselves, but it is certainly true that there is no leveller like a common service of those in need.

I do believe that it is the role of all Christians to be people of service in this manner, and that each day we are presented with ways of serving others. An example which sticks in my mind was the occasion when I was asked to preach the clergy retreat in the Diocese of Niassa in northern Mozambique. While I was not there in the aftermath to see whether my teaching made any difference, there was one thing I did spontaneously, from which I learned a great deal. The custom there is for everyone to be presented with a bowl with soap, water and a towel to wash your hands before a meal. This is doubly essential because the tradition is to eat with the hands, and the hands are used to aid other bodily functions as well. I was the honoured guest, so I was pushed forward to wash my hands first, and on an inspiration I took the bowl myself and washed the hands of all the others there, washing mine last – and I took care that I did the same every time we ate. A small thing but I believe in any culture where clergy are respected or considered important, that we need constantly reminding of the commandment to be at the service of others, not to stand over them with human authority.

So far I have shared some of my own thoughts with you, prompted by Bishop Michael's writing and of course by the Gospel of John. I want to conclude this evening by sharing with you two stories told by others. The first is from the German Jewish philosopher and mystic Martin Buber:

One midnight a Rabbi was absorbed in the mystic teachings, and he heard a knock at his window. A drunken peasant stood outside and asked to be let in and given a bed for the night. For a moment the holy man's heart was full of anger and he said to himself: 'How can a drunk have the insolence to ask to be let in, and what business has he in this house?' But then he said silently in his heart: 'And what business has he in God's world? But if God gets along with him, can I reject him?' He opened the door at once, and prepared a bed.

The second story is a very ancient one from the Desert Fathers:

Some old men came to see one of the Abbots and said to him, 'We see some of the brothers falling asleep during divine worship. Should we wake them up?' He said, 'As for me, when I see a brother who is falling asleep during the Office, I lay his head on my knees and let him rest.'

*Lord, it is easy to be full of ourselves
and what we might accomplish in your name;
teach us to be like you:
to open ourselves to your emptiness;
to practise the humility that puts us at the service of others;
to respond first and always to the needs
of those who are little in the eyes of the world.*

Amen.

PC, 18th February 2024