Sermon for 12th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: 1 Samuel 17:57 – 18:5; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

i

The OT writer clearly sees God’s providence at work in the unexpected emergence of David the shepherd boy onto the stage of his nation’s history at this crucial time. For God has blessed David with faith and courage: qualities which were once seen in Saul. King Saul was once known as the ‘lion’, but against the terrifying Goliath, it is only the unarmed, untrained shepherd boy who dares to step forward for battle.

In 18:5 we see David’s military successes continue, proving his win over Goliath wasn’t just a flash in the pan. God was with David when he confronted Goliath, and David obviously remains in God’s favour as his subsequent battle honours prove. It is a case of ‘cometh the hour, cometh the man.’

Heroic leader though David was when he went alone to face Goliath with nothing more than his shepherd’s sling, he did not continue to act alone. Great leaders are only as great as the men and women who follow them. The greatest military geniuses of the world know how to get the maximum effect from the forces at their disposal, but they still rely on the courage and ability of those who are prepared to be led.

In most military and indeed, non-military settings, people have little choice but to obey the orders of their superiors, whether they think those orders are likely to lead to success or not. But in David’s case, he was a ‘nobody’ who managed to gain the allegiance and even the love of many who were superior to him in social status and age and experience. The most notable of these socially superior followers was the royal prince, Jonathan.

Jonathan has the grace to acknowledge the superior fighting qualities of David, as well as David’s superior charisma. Jonathan displays neither jealousy nor resentment and freely gives David his loyalty, friendship and practical support. At times he would act as a buffer between his father, King Saul, and the up-and-coming David, whose popularity and success Saul came to resent. At other times, Jonathan offers David practical support such as supplying the shepherd boy with military equipment of bow, sword and soldier’s cloak and tunic.

Good effective leadership depends on good and loyal support.

ii

Paul is one of the NT’s heroic leaders. Paul is highly gifted in theological understanding, despite his less than impressive physical presence (2 Cor 10:10). (David, we must remember, was a man with beautiful eyes like a girl, hardly warrior material himself). Paul has the same courage and charisma that David once possessed and in 2 Corinthians 6:5-10 he lists some of the dangers and deprivations he has faced. He does this to defend himself against those now appearing in Corinth wishing to undermine Paul as an authentic apostle and promote their own reputation. Paul ironically dubs these puffed-up interlopers, the ‘super-apostles’ (2 Cor 12:11).

Paul has founded a thriving Christian community in a pagan city famous for its wild, sexual licence. The Church has been blessed with numerous spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12), and whilst he was ministering to them in Corinth, he did not take from them financially, but lived off his own tent-making and from the gifts of other churches he had established (2 Cor 10:8-9).

Despite all that Paul has done for them, they have not shown him loyalty. They have divided their allegiances between him and other apostles, such as Peter and Apollos (1 Cor 3); they have listened eagerly to those who came and denigrated Paul as a true apostle (2 Cor 11).

The result is that Corinth has become a divided church, a weaker church than it should be in the light of the many spiritual blessings it has received. There has been nothing lacking in Paul’s leadership, but in order for the church to flourish they must open their hearts to him, just as he opened his heart to them (2 Cor 6:11-13).

Paul points out that he has put no stumbling block in their way; if they fail and the church falls apart into contending factions, it will be their fault and not his.

iii

In today’s gospel reading we see the Christian pattern of leadership personified supremely in Jesus. We immediately recognise in the story of the calming of the storm the same qualities in Jesus that we identified in both David and Paul.

We see that Jesus has the charisma to teach and preach which attracts thousands of listeners. He inspires people to follow him, sacrificing their normal family livelihoods to do so – as is the case with the twelve disciples, but it is likely that there were many others in a larger group of followers that accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry. It is from this unnamed group of followers that Matthias is chosen to replace Judas in Acts 1:21. These would have been in the ‘other boats’ mentioned.

Jesus is decisive – he tells the disciples to put out across the lake, and they obey without question. Caught in a sudden storm for which the lake is notorious, Jesus displays coolness and confidence in his own ability to address the crisis whilst those around him are in full panic mode, ready to turn their fear upon Jesus, whom they foolishly accuse of ‘not caring’ because he is asleep in the boat.

His calm head in the face of a crisis is leadership quality at its best.

David’s defeat of Goliath was amazing enough, but Jesus aspires to the supernatural realm to demonstrate his power. He rebukes the wind and the waves and they fall still.

This is a supreme demonstration of his courage and his faith. What would have happened if his words had just been lost on the wind? That is a question for lesser men than Jesus. He had no doubt in his unique relationship with God the Father, and his authority and power that proceeded from that status. It is in the light of such demonstrations of supernatural power in the many healings and miraculous feedings that the fearful disciples of the boat become the fearless apostles of the church.

There are things we need to learn from such examples of leadership – lessons both for those who are called to lead and for those who are called to be led.

For example, we can trust God to send the right person at a time of crisis. The Church has known times of turmoil and grave danger many times in its history, but in the face of each onslaught, from the persecutions of Imperial Rome, the pagan tribes that eventually overwhelmed the Roman Empire, the turmoil of The Black Death, industrialisation, rationalist Enlightenment thinking, two world wars, to today’s technological revolution – God has found the men and women to lead his people on.

We can also learn that effective leadership requires a partnership between the leader and the led. When ministry goes bad, it is not always down to the shortcomings of the ordained. The people of the parish also have a responsibility to respond and take their share of responsibility in the Church’s mission.

We can also find encouragement in today’s reading to face the storms we all encounter from time to time in life.

Sometimes, the shock of a crisis makes us react as the disciples reacted and in panic we turn on Jesus and wonder where he is and if he is interested at all in our troubles. This is all very human and probably happens a lot more than we would care to admit.

Jesus did not offer his disciples a trouble-free walk through life, nor does he offer such a thing to any of his followers, despite our subconscious assumption that our faith is a kind of insurance policy.

Yet what Jesus does through such events as the calming of the storm is demonstrate that nothing is too hard for him to conquer. Death, illness, storm, or whatever crisis we face, Christ is not defeated.

Our faith will not guarantee we avoid terrible times, and sometimes it is our faith itself which brings on such terrible times, but our faith gives us hope and strength to endure and the consolation that ultimately, we are in God’s loving hands. We will in Christ weather the storm.

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