

**It's OK To Be A Servant**  
**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year B**  
**20 September 2009**

The reputation of John F Kennedy has taken a bit of a battering in recent years. Journalists and historians have told us in some detail about his womanising. They have pointed out that his tragic death conveniently occurred before the really big tests of difficult political decisions that were coming up in the lift as the 1960's proceeded. Nevertheless, there is something unique about his way of speaking to the electorate that marks him out among modern politicians.

“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” When was the last time a politician appealed to our sense of altruism, idealism, and our desire to sacrifice ourself in the service of others? “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival of liberty.” Here was an agenda for a foreign policy, that had it been carried out, would have won America the admiration of the world.

Something is going wrong in our world because the notion of service is being poisoned. Since the era of the enlightenment it has been seen as the virtue of dogs. The result is that there is “a shrinking supply of care” in our society, as one observer put it, “a denuding of the family landscape of its emotional abundance and pleasure.” “The words “thrive” and “happy” go out of fashion...replaced by thinner more restricted notions of human well being impelled by the terms “succeed,” “cope,” and “survive,” to quote Arlie Russell Hochschild.

Some people have a natural desire to be a helper, to do the looking after, shaped in this way by the family they grew up in. The gospel commands a service ethic on every Christian regardless of their temperament, family background, or practical skills, or the lack of them. That is the way things are to be in the Kingdom. In that world it is ok to be a servant, there is nothing shameful about it – in fact it marks you out as being worthy of deeper trust and further responsibility.

So if you want to get on in the world that Jesus is making, to be influential, to be a mover and a shaker, then you do it by operating in the style of servant leadership, with a strong dose of humility thrown in to keep your ego in check. William Barclay summed it up brilliantly when he wrote:

It was not that Jesus abolished ambition. Rather he recreated and sublimated ambition. For the ambition to rule he substituted the ambition to serve. For the ambition to have things done for us he substituted the ambition to do things for others.

What happens when jealousy and ambition get the upper hand in God's world was brought home to me last December when I was taking the Franciscans retreat in Brisbane, and one of their number explained to me how the Anglican world in the South Pacific had been reshaped in the post colonial world. Our present reality consists of the Diocese of Polynesia, made up of Fiji, Tonga, and the surrounding islands – an Anglican Church too small to be a Province in its own right, and which was tucked in with us as a late afterthought when the three tikanga constitution came into existence. Then to the left of that on the map is the Province of Melanesia, which is persistently under-funded, and

which rather regrets New Zealand's decision to cut off financial assistance when Melanesia became an independent Province. Then, to the left of that is the Province of Papua New Guinea. Their persistent problem has been finding enough local priests of a sufficient calibre for national leadership roles. The recently appointed Bishop of Port Moresby is Peter Ramsden, an Englishman, who was a year ahead of me at Mirfield. It is very unusual in the world we are living in now for an expatriate to be invited to be a Bishop in the third world.

This divided, fragmented and under resourced reality is not the way things were originally supposed to be. What was planned and proposed was a Province of the South Pacific taking in Polynesia, Melanesia, Papua New Guinea, and even the very northern tip of Australia, where the Torres Strait islanders live. While this would have been a vast geographical spread for a Province, with all the associated travel costs involved, it would have given the newly formed Province sufficient critical mass to address the current problems I have just outlined. Not only would they have been big enough to make a go of it as they made common use of their leadership pool, and training facilities, but it would also have been more efficient and easy for the New Zealand and Australian mission boards to provide the necessary financial assistance.

But this common sense and Christian alternative future was not to be because the last generation of white Bishops each wanted to be the first Archbishop of the new Province of the South Pacific. As these mutually contending ambitions cancelled each other out, they settled instead for the partitioned reality, which we have now inherited. I wonder - is too late to go back and to put the pieces

back together again? It would of course require humility, and a strong desire to be of service to one another, to bring such a reality into existence. But it seems to me that the members of such a large, strong, and united Province of the South Pacific could well take great pride in belonging to such a Church, particularly given the enlarged respect and clout this would give them in Communion affairs.

As Jesus draws near to Jerusalem in this last section of Mark he is about the re-education of his disciples. The message he has for them is difficult and painful to hear. Like a patient who has picked up the signals from their doctor that the diagnosis is not good, they are reluctant to ask for more information because they fear to hear more. They have blocked out the clear indication that martyrdom awaits their inspiring spiritual leader. Instead the more ambitious among them are positioning themselves for the top slots in what they assume will be a continuing movement. “Go for it,” they are about to hear, “but just be aware that if that is what you really want, then nothing will ever be the same for you again. You will be hollowed out from within. Pride and ego and acquisitiveness will have to go. Everything operates in reverse in the Kingdom. In God’s world being a servant is cool. Those who are prepared to die to self are the ones who will be trusted with executive authority. The servants are the ones who will receive status, and honour, and prestige.