

**Ambitious, Power Hungry, Status Seekers
Need Not Apply
29th Sunday, Year B
18 October 2009**

From trade unions, to government departments, to political parties, to business organisations, to the military, much thought goes in to the art of leadership - how to recognise potential leaders, how to train them, and how to motivate them throughout their career path. There are certain people who want to lead. They have a combination of self-confidence, drive to succeed, high energy levels, and the ability to share their courage and to conceal their fear.

Good leadership is essential for any organisation. And leadership is a gift to be shared. But being a born leader is an ambivalent gift. For at the heart of it all is the exercising of power. Leaders enjoy making things happen, getting people to do things, and that involves persuading or coercing people to do things they wouldn't have otherwise wanted to do. When leaders get things wrong their decisions can have momentous consequences for others. Greed is another potential pitfall. Sometimes they are highly rewarded for what they do, and that can create a sense of entitlement and acquisitiveness. Then they use their privileged positions to plunder their organisations.

Above all leadership has a pervasive, subtle temptation within it – you can get to enjoy exercising power for its own sake, and then power possesses you. Arrogance, dominating behaviour, the cruel using of people – all of these can flow from a born to rule attitude.

So having properly motivated leaders who genuinely care for the people they are in charge of is a crucial issue for any organisation or community. Which brings us to the central dilemma of leadership recruitment. Often, indeed usually, people who want to lead are by nature ambitious, power hungry, and status seekers. They are motivated by the desire for recognition, respect, approval, praise, and the further increase of attention drawing responsibility.

A shrewd organisation skilfully uses the mixed motivation of its leadership pool to get the best out of them, by a combination of leading out their desire to excel and to get on, and by containing or minimising their more obvious egoism. So leaders are managed through a mixture of rewards and punishments. But the human need for status is understood, and is explicitly used to motivate the leadership cadre.

This morning Jesus is presented with just such a leadership management issue. Peter, James and John have emerged as the inner circle of the disciples. They were on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus. But Peter recently blotted his copybook, just at the moment when he had got in first with recognising the true identity of Jesus. James and John recognise their moment of opportunity to push in ahead, and drawing Jesus aside they present a request so naked in its power seeking egoism that they feel obliged to make it in a rather round about way.

Jesus is cautious in the way he responds, but he must have been staggered by what he has just heard. James and John have obviously screened out everything Jesus has been saying about his

impending cruel death, and about the priority of servant leadership in the Kingdom. All they have focussed on is the fact that they are about to arrive in the royal city, and that something big is about to happen. Surely the top slots in the corporation are up for grabs, and either the boss didn't really mean what he said about being a suffering servant, or we will be able to talk him out of it.

But their failure of understanding is shared by the others also. Their indignation when they find out about what has been going on is not that James and John have missed the point about how things are to be in the Kingdom, but rather that they tried to sneak in ahead and to get what all of them wanted.

So follows some devastating teaching about the kind of leadership qualities that are to be expected in the Kingdom. It is not just that he rubs it in that if you want to lead you will have to serve like a slave. He also makes it clear that even loyalty and self-sacrifice don't automatically qualify you to climb the leadership tree. You can't earn your way up the ladder. This of course contradicts the worldly wisdom of all the organisations I have just been talking about.

What is more it is made explicit that the ambitious, the power hungry, and status seekers need not apply to be in charge. The normal human motivations for leadership ability are ruled out. God selects who he wants to be his overseers for his own mysterious reasons. Pushing your way to the front is a waste of time and energy.

As for the request to be at the right and the left of Jesus in his glory, there is a strange irony in that. The moment when the Son of Man is glorified is when he is lifted up on the cross. If James and

John had been prepared to accept the invitation to share in this destiny of suffering with Jesus, then they would have had to stick to their guns in the garden of Gethsemane, and been prepared to be marched off to execution with him. Then, of course, they would have gone on to enduring fame and glory in the annals of Christianity, but they weren't up to that. Instead two thieves got to share that honour. Those who aspire to high office in the Church might like to reflect on the prediction that crucifixion is a highly likely follow on consequence.

Today's warning against status seeking is as hard for us to hear as it was back then. It is of a piece with the difficult teaching that has been served up for the last few Sundays. Fidelity and enduring, committed relationships are expected of Christians in their intimacy lives. Wealth accumulation is a no no because it creates imbalances of status and power in the Kingdom. Now apparently only humble servant leaders who are also prepared to embrace the master's destiny of suffering are the sorts who are suitable to lead.

What an off-putting business this Christianity is! Who in their right mind would want to join, or to stay, having listened to Jesus spell out what is involved in life in the Kingdom, to the few people who were prepared to follow him to the end? Yet somehow the secret of our happiness and fulfilment is bound up in all that he is saying.

But we will have to get our heads around the fact that Christianity is a counter cultural business. It involves renunciation, and the capacity to accept suffering in some circumstances. Power, sex and money – the three dominant forces in worldly society are not allowed to rule the roost here. We sit lightly

to all those things. Who is able to live like this?
Certainly we will need the grace of God to live in this
extraordinary way. Yet what other way of life will
bring us to the life that really is life?