

Love and Obey
21st Sunday, Year A
Matthew 16: 13-20
21 August 2011

Some years ago with a Sunday to myself while on holiday I decided to attend Judah, the church for people who didn't like church, where informality and spontaneity reigned supreme. True to its reputation it seemed to avoid any hierarchical leadership, and the Service proceeded with a variety of people moving things along. Then, at the point where anyone in the congregation was allowed to share a variety of charismatic gifts, a most interesting thing happened. An individual began to give a long, rambling, disconnected prophecy – a mental health consumer by the look of him. Just as he was getting in to his stride a Maori guy dressed in an army greatcoat stood up and said in a loud commanding voice, “The Spirit is not with you brother, sit down,” and was immediately obeyed. The phrase has stayed with me, and I have been longing to say it to somebody in church ever since.

We live in an age where freedom is valued very highly, and in which obedience is seen as the virtue of dogs. In such a world authority must make its way gingerly and apologetically. We are told that the only kind of authority that counts is self-authenticating authority. I guess this means that the person in charge is required to be wise, consistent, and without any trace of hypocrisy in their character – quite an ask of leadership in a fallen world of less than perfect people.

In a world in which freedom reigns supreme the customs and the culture of the Christian church are a counter cultural phenomenon. Take for instance

the stole which every Bishop; Priest or Deacon wears as a badge of office. It symbolises taking the yoke of obedience upon you. It means that this particular spiritual leader promises to present the gospel on the church's terms and not on their own, to abide by the house rules of the church, and not to shift the boundary markers of acceptable behaviour to suit themselves. In the Christian worldview love and authority and obedience aren't seen as opposed realities. In fact when they can be brought to fit together appropriately they give birth to true freedom.

This love and obey reciprocal rhythm plays itself out in today's gospel passage. On the strength of being the first with true insight in to who Jesus really is Peter is given a role of primacy in the early Christian community. He is also given the power to bind and loose, to admit or deny entrance in to the kingdom of God, an astounding act of devolutionary responsibility.

In many ways he is a surprising choice. Just a few verses on he will go from being the rock on which the church is built to being a stumbling stone when he gets it wrong about the Messiah's destiny of cross bearing in Jerusalem. His impulsive nature and uneven track record is well known to us. But there are a couple of things about Peter that help us to understand why Jesus gives him the affectionate nickname "Rocky." He tends to be the first in things – the first disciple to be called for instance – and he notices changes quickly, and is not slow to point them out, today's dialogue of true identity being a case in point.

So 25 years after Peter's death Matthew's community gives him a place of honour, despite the

fact that Paul had far outperformed him in the front rank leadership of the church, and that James the Lord's brother had emerged as the authoritative leader of the Jerusalem church. But again Peter continued to have moments of greatness when he was the firstest with the mostest. On the day of Pentecost he preaches the sermon of a lifetime, and converts thousands. And in the "kill and eat" vision at Joppa, what some critics have called "the second Pentecost," he is the first after Paul with the God given insight that the gentiles, and their unclean dietary customs, are now the primary mission field.

It is this deep immersion in the things of God, and the ability to sense where the gospel adventure is moving to, that gives Peter the privilege of authority. It gives him the right to take his place with Paul and James as people the church needs to listen to with respect. The question is was Peter's authority handed on to others, and in particular to the Bishop of Rome and his successors?

Our church can't agree with that point of view. It notes that for the first 8 centuries of the church its leadership in the really important things came from what was called a pentarchy – the five primatial sees of Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome. If the Patriarchs and Archbishops of these five churches of front rank honour couldn't sort the issue out, then it was referred to an oecumenical council to which all the bishops of the Christian world were invited. The Bishop of Rome was only part of the leadership team, not the most important one, but when the Muslim conquests submerged some of the other primatial sees, the Popes began to make leadership claims for themselves that were unprecedented.

Our church takes a conciliar approach to authority issues in the worldwide church. When the Lambeth conference speaks with a clear voice we should listen up. When the Primates meet and come to a common mind the issue should be settled for the rest of us. Which is why it is a great pity that the last Lambeth conference, and the last Primates meeting, became just a sharing and small group dialogue session. The Archbishop of Canterbury dropped the ball, and two great opportunities were missed to do something useful and authoritative about the growing disunity in the Anglican Communion. Leaders are there to lead, and to exercise the gift of authority as a ministry of service to us all.

The major issue before the worldwide church today is how the local church and the universal church should relate to one another. It is the theme that the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission is addressing right now under the leadership of our own Archbishop David Moxon. How can the local church be valued and listened to, while acknowledging and respecting the authority of the universal church? Catholics and Anglicans are staring down opposite ends of the telescope. Catholics are hot on the claims of the universal church while giving local churches less than their due. Anglicans tend to be lost in the local while having an adolescent attitude to central authority.

The issue isn't just confined to the wider councils of the church. As we will be hearing in this morning's parish forum the Church Property Trustees are claiming that they and the Bishop are the ones who have the power to decide what rebuilds should be allowed to proceed in the quake hit parishes of Christchurch. This is an unprecedented claim to

central authority, which we have not heard before in this diocese. Parishes will want to point out that they paid for their buildings originally, and paid the insurance premiums on them. They who pay the piper call the tune. In the past they initiated building projects, subject to the consent of standing committee and the Church Property Trustees. The role of standing committee and CPT was to exercise a guardianship role stopping parishes from making stupid decisions – it was not to make the decisions for them. Here is a matter for respectful, courteous, determined and energetic dialogue between the local and the central church.

We live under authority. Christians have no need to have the hang-ups about this that unbeliever's do. Yet at the same time the kingdom has checks and balances against the exercise of unreasonable and high handed leadership. That is the thing I forget to mention about Peter, another of the reasons Jesus liked him so much. Maybe he had a big mouth, but he didn't have a big ego. Having put his foot in it a number of times, some of them quite important, he would be inclined to have a gentle touch and a humble approach to the exercise of authority over others.