

Sunday November 22nd, 2020

Christ the King

Ezekiel 34:11-16

“My King Is...”

I have noticed something very disturbing of late that maybe many of you can appreciate. I’ve discovered that the more I seem to think I know or understand about life, the more I really don’t know or understand. Case in point is a public service announcement I stumbled across that addresses the serious problems that arise in the resumes of clergy seeking placement in churches. So as a service to you all I now share with you statements that should be edited out of a minister’s resume.

No minister should include in his or her resume the following phrases:

“I believe empathy is overrated.”

“In the five churches I have faithfully served over the past two years...”

“My hobbies include pit bulls and automatic weapons.”

“I am willing to sacrifice my family for the sake of the ministry. I am also willing to sacrifice yours.”

“I have learned to cope with financial crisis at every church I’ve served.”

“I require an attractive secretary and/or organist.”

“My extensive counseling of church members has proved a rich source of sermon illustrations.”

“I’ve been told that every sermon I preach is better than the next.”

“My personality has provided me ample opportunity to develop conflict-resolution skills.”

I shared this amusing list with you because I want to talk to you about leadership. I may be stating the obvious, but leadership, whether in a church or in any other organization, may be the most critical determination of whether an organization thrives, or falters. With the right leadership, the people associated with an organization can thrive and reach their full potential. With the wrong leadership, no matter how well intentioned, people wither on the vine and in some cases find every aspect of their lives destroyed.

It is hard to believe that this past week marked the 54th anniversary of one of the most horrendous demonstration of leadership gone very wrong. Deep in the jungle of Guyana in South America, hundreds of people, followed their religious leader, Rev. Jim Jones, into what was promised to be a paradise on earth. When they arrived in Jones’ Town, what they discovered was hardly a paradise.

Buildings in the guarded compound were nothing more than corrugated tin shacks, with people crammed into bunk beds in barrack type accommodations. Residents of this rustic community were constantly indoctrinated by the warped ego-centric theology of Rev. Jones, whose fanatical inner circle of followers, enforced conformity and obedience to Jones’ illogical whims; by force, if necessary. No one knows, but we can reasonably assume that Rev. Jones had gone mad in some way, probably because he decided that his group was being persecuted.

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Paranoia and persecution complexes are common among ego-maniacs, and socio-paths. Jones somehow decided that the only solution to avoid this perceived persecution was for everyone in the compound to commit suicide. So, on Jones' order, huge jugs of powdered fruit drink were prepared in which massive doses of poison were added. I should point out that many called this drink Kool-Aid, when in actual fact it was another brand of drink sold in Guyana.

At gun point: men, women, and children were forced to come before Jones and drink their share of this unholy communion drink of fruit punch, thus dying of poison. In the horror of these events, medical personnel in the compound killed infants by using syringes to shoot the deadly concoction into their mouths.

Those who tried to escape, were shot by sadistic guards who maintained a fanatical loyalty to Jones. In the end, only a few people made it out alive. The incident is so ingrained in our collective conscience that we now have an idiom, "Don't drink the Kool-Aid", meaning, "don't believe the party line" or what your leaders are telling you. It is a terrible chapter in religious circles.

It is also clearly a cautionary tale that raises questions about how a church that began under such positive circumstance, with a leader who was much revered, could go so wrong. Among all the conclusions we can take from the Jones Town Massacre, is the truth that you can always identify who are truly godly leaders. because godly leaders unlike Jim Jones, always seek the best for those they lead.

When those who are being lead no longer thrive, then clearly God no longer honours or blesses that leadership. This is at the very heart of what Ezekiel was writing about in our Old Testament lesson today. In the very familiar, and comforting language of shepherding, Ezekiel pronounces God's judgment on Israel's leadership.

Chapter 34 is a litany of leadership failures, described in metaphorical terms of shepherds caring for their sheep. Ezekiel speaks of the selfishness of leaders who feed themselves before their sheep. "You drink their milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let the flocks starve." In other words, the peasant class has been exploited; they have been worked hard, taxed excessively, and used up for the personal gain of the elite.

The needy in their society who are sick, broken, or lost are ignored; and when attention is given to the sheep it is often given, with inexcusable force and cruelty. So much stress was placed on the people, that Ezekiel points out that many people simply fled the country as refugees, and no one has gone to search for them. In other words, no one cares if they even existed. In their lost state, these abandoned sheep are at the mercy of wild animals; meaning people and powers that do not respect God's people.

Ezekiel states that God is judging this leadership harshly. Those leaders who abuse their authority and privilege will be removed and in a surprising move, God himself will take their place. And unlike the current leadership, God will judge and manage the flock for the betterment of the sheep.

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And so, the sheep and the goats will be separated as the Gospel lesson for today in the lectionary indicates. (Matthew 25:31-46) Those sheep, which have trampled the pastures of others, or fouled the drinking water, will be separated out. Those sheep that have gotten fat, while others have starved, will be judged. And God will gather in the: sick, scrawny, poor, lost and abused sheep.

These words of God through the prophet Ezekiel, are an indictment not only of exploitive political systems, but of all systems that steal the vitality and hope from people. That goes for Prime Minister's, CEO's, managers, coaches, ministers, or anyone in a position of authority.

One of the questions coming to mind on this whole subject is, how did these shepherds become so harmful to the sheep in whose care they are entrusted. The one word that keeps coming to mind to describe what is happening is empathy, or the lack of empathy as the case may be. We often confuse empathy with sympathy. Sympathy is feeling sad for someone, such as feeling sad for someone who's had a loved one die.

Sympathy can be lovely, and expected at a funeral, but it carries no real healing power. Empathy, on the other hand, is truly knowing or trying to learn what it is like to be in another person's experience or as we say "another person's shoes". Empathy involves understanding another's heart, mind, and spirit-including their motives, backgrounds, and feelings.

The more empathy we have for others, the more we come to appreciate and reverence who they are. For to touch the inner feelings and soul of another human being, is to walk on holy ground. To gain empathy for another person, we must listen to them with our eyes, hearts and ears. However, most people do not practice empathy in trying to understand someone, but rather concentrate and listen with regard to their response.

Those who are not empathetic are busy filtering everything through their own perspective, rather than trying to understand another's frame of reference. Empathy is implied by Jesus' command to love our neighbour as ourselves. To truly love our neighbours, we have to understand and appreciate, and even internalize their experience. In Ezekiel's prophecy, the leaders had no empathy for those they led.

They cared not one wit for the living conditions of their sheep. They set a terrible example, because we read that the same lack of empathy also existed within the sheep themselves, as they trampled over reach other to the best food and spoiled the badly needed resources. It may seem harsh to say that they just didn't care, but it seems that they truly didn't. Perhaps they pronounced promises to fix systemic problems, but in the end, they were simply empty words.

Words used to placate the anger of the populace, but offering no relief to their distress. *In his best-selling biography "Huey Long", the historian T. Harry William's tells about the first time Huey Long campaigned in rural, predominantly Catholic Southern Louisiana.*

Sunday November 22nd, 2020
Christ the King

A veteran local advisor told Long at the outset of the tour, "Remember one thing, Huey. South Louisiana is a lot different from your northern part of the state. We've got a lot of Catholic voters down here."

"I know," Long said. And so, at every whistle stop on the tour Huey Long would start with these words, "When I was a boy, I'd get up at 6:00 A.M. every Sunday, hitch our old horse up to the buggy, and take my Catholic grandparents to Mass. I'd bring them home, and take my Baptist Grandparents to church." The audiences responded warmly at these words, and the advisor finally told Huey, "You've been holding out on us. We didn't know you had any Catholic grandparents."

"Don't be a fool," replied Huey. "We didn't even have a horse!" Huey Long may have been politically astute, but he was far from being a great leader. All he cared about was getting elected, not making life better for those he was called on to serve. All of this thinking on leadership simply underscores the critical truth that good, godly leadership, is critical to our vitality as people, but finding such leadership can be a tremendous challenge as our own experience can attest.

God has foreseen our hunger for leadership that is not only empathetic, but could also bring hope to we sheep that are intimately associated with: grief, sorrow and being lost. God said through Ezekiel that he himself would take over shepherding his sheep. How do you think this shepherding by God of his people was to be accomplished? Perhaps you already know the answer to that question, because it is found in verse 23.

"And I will set one shepherd over them, even my servant David. He will feed them and be a shepherd to them." Any idea who that shepherd is? In John 10 the identity of the promised shepherd of God is revealed. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." As the good shepherd Jesus empathizes with his sheep, he seeks life for his sheep and life in great abundance.

This is wonderful news for those of us who have been shepherded, or lead by people who have failed us. This is wonderful news for those of us who are confused by the conflicting messages our leaders are giving us. This is wonderful news for any of us who feel beaten up by life and then ignored by the very people we believe should be there to care for us.

Jesus is truly the Good Shepherd because he is truly empathetic to our needs and our burdens. If you have any doubts about how much Jesus has identified with his sheep, then listen to these powerful words from Isaiah 53:1-12.

READ Isaiah 53:1-12

So, I ask you, who are you following? Who is determining the value and purpose of your life? Who is the King of your soul? Let me urge you to consider Jesus.