

## **TRANSFORMED LEADERSHIP**

**A Sermon for St Peter's Day, 2007.**

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The troubled life of the Anglican Communion has been much in the news lately, especially in the church press and on the internet.

There has been a proposal for an Anglican Covenant which representative leaders of each province or national church would be invited to sign, committing each part of the communion to a common standard of faith and morals and governance (as if we didn't have such a standard in the scriptures, the creeds, the 39 articles and the episcopal ordering of our church!) Of course the devil is in the detail of this covenant, as it seeks to change our way of being governed and the way the life of our communion holds together, so that the current troubles over issues in human sexuality might be solved. It proposes that the gathering of the primates of the various national churches be the policing authority for questions of dispute.

Now I mention that not because I want to lecture you on the niceties of international Anglican Church government, but rather because this is a dispute about the sort of leadership we need and should have in the church, about its character and origins, and *that* subject is one which this festival, and our gospel reading in particular have something to say.

These current debates and proposals about what sort of primacy our primates should have is a very germane one to think about on St Peter's Day. Theologians like to call this sort of primatial leadership the Petrine Ministry; the ministry of leadership and unity modelled on that of St Peter.

But the problem is, which *part* of the story of St Peter is the most crucial one?

*One* version of Petrine Ministry emphasises the power of the keys, and sees the ministry of primacy as, when push comes to shove, being about rule. Certainly a lot of the way in which Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria works seems based on this sort of theology. The primates should just lay down the law about what should and shouldn't happen, and the church should obey.

A key Petrine text for this is Matthew's version of the story of Peter's confession of Christ as Lord at Caesarea Philippi, (*who do you say that I am; you are the Christ the son of the living God*). Jesus' response to Peter's confession is to give him the new name of Peter, the rock, and to say "*on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and what you bind on earth will be bound in heave , and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*" [Matt 16:13-17]

If that is the key to our theology of leadership (forgive the pun!) then leadership and primacy is about power and authority.

But of course that isn't the whole of Peter's story, is it, and I want to suggest it isn't the heart of it, and therefore that it isn't the heart of what Christian leadership and ministry is about either.

Our gospel today gives us John's account of how Peter came to be the leader of the apostolic band. This is a story not about power but about weakness, and about God's transforming grace. We can read it as a commissioning story, with Peter being given his apostolic mission of leading the followers of Jesus and the authority which goes with it. But when we read it more closely, we can see it as a story of transformation, and of that transformation being the ground for the ministry of leadership Peter has.

Imagine how it was for Peter as he is asked three times if he loves Jesus.

*Simon son of John, do you love me more than these? Yes Lord.* [ Perhaps with the feeling of - Yeah, of course]

*Simon son of John, do you love me? Yes Lord* [Perhaps he's thinking now, well, what is he on about - he does know, and I've just said it, and perhaps he's even feeling a little hurt that Jesus doesn't believe him.]

*Simon son of John, do you love me? Now he is hurt.* John records it, but what is also becoming apparent to Peter must be the echoes of something else Peter said about Jesus, three times. The memory of Peter's threefold denial must now be coming painfully to the surface. And perhaps that just intensifies the hurt for Peter.

*Yes Lord, you know everything, and you do know that I love you.* Jesus response of *Feed my lambs* is followed by the reminder that Peter who once was in charge of his destiny and his responses will one day be led by others and handed over into their power, completes the change.

The threefold question to Peter brings him face to face with his own threefold denial. Here by the charcoal fire at breakfast time by the lake, the memory of a previous scene by a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest becomes painfully vivid. But the good news of this encounter is that this confrontation with its acutely painful memory is for Peter not the end of the story; indeed it becomes a new beginning and a turning point.

Each time Peter affirms his love for Jesus, he is given the task of leadership, the task of caring for the flock. Even when the memory of threefold denial is staring both of them in the face, Jesus gives Peter this task. *Lord you know everything.* Indeed he does, and Peter knows that he knows - that they are both remembering this previous threefold denial, and that despite that, and maybe even because of it, and through it and beyond it, Peter does love Jesus, and can embrace this task of leadership, and all that it will bring in terms of having his hands bound and his belt bound around him, and being handed over and led away.

Peter is transformed by this experience of meeting the risen Lord ever bit as much as Paul (whom the church also celebrates today) was transformed by *his* encounter on the Damascus road. What changes for Peter is his memory as well as his future.

In this encounter he discovers that his past is not the end of the story, and not the blockage that he might have thought. Jesus has recalled this memory for Peter not to rub his nose in his failure, but as the beginning of his work and his leadership. Peter's past is there now not as a burden or an embarrassment, but as the ground out of which he can learn to love truly and in action not merely by his words. Peter's past failure is real, but is not ultimately determinative, and yet because it is still real, and not to be forgotten, it becomes the foreground out of which Peter can learn and grow and love more richly and faithfully.<sup>i</sup>

The feeding, tending and caring of Christ's flock which is the nature of Peter's leadership in this way of looking at it all comes out of this experience of the transforming love and grace of God, from the Easter experience of new life and of love which is stronger than all our human failures betrayals and refusals of love.

That's a very different sort of basis for leadership, and I suggest a very different sort of leadership will arise from it.

In his first book, Michael Ramsey, who came to know a thing or two about leadership and primacy, sometimes to his cost, wrote about bishops being signs of how we die to self, and rise into the life of yielding self to each other within Christ's body. That's what he said was the real gospel importance of bishops, that they embodied this central facet of Christian life, and showed it forth.<sup>ii</sup> [If you've never heard of him, Ramsey was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1961 to 1974.]

Primacy, leadership in ministry *does* have an authority, but it is the authority to hold us to our confession of Christ as Lord, and to our common baptismal experience of dying to self and rising into the new common life of Christ. It is not an authority to command, to rule, but to keep before us the nature of the church itself as the society in which we die and rise (to quote Ramsey again)<sup>iii</sup>.

This all speaks to us about leadership, which some of us have, in different sorts of ways. But it does actually speak to *all* of us, for each of us is called to be part of the ministering people of God, and each of us is blessed, hallowed and sanctified for that task in our baptism. Today we are pointed to the ground and foundation of all ministry and for the ministry of all. This foundation is not our own rightness or righteousness, our own faithfulness or success, but rather the surpassing faithfulness of God which goes beyond our own capacity for failure and betrayal. We find that ground in the experience of Easter, in the baptismal shape of our Christian lives, in that generous transforming experience of love which accepts us as we are, and makes us what we can become, and which shapes our loving and serving of others so that it is free and freeing, generously and gracious, and honouring to all people.

As we encounter the risen Jesus, week by week and day by day, may *we too* find the same transforming reality at the heart of our life in Christ, and may it give *us* strength and courage for ministry.

<sup>i</sup> The foregoing exegesis of John 21 closely follows the line taken in Rowan Williams, *Resurrection*, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1982, Chapter 2

<sup>ii</sup> A.M.Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition - London: Longmans 1956, reprinted London: SPCK, 1990, pp. 50, 60-1, Ch 6 generally and esp. p.85

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid.*, p.44