

**Sermon on 2 Corinthians 4: 1-12**  
**Thinking, Being, Doing, Christianly**

**So today as we have commissioned Elders in our church we reflect a little on the nature of Christian ministry.**

For the Christian faith, ministry is not something that's done by a group of trained professionals called clergy, but rather a calling for all those who profess to follow Jesus.

We're in this together.

We all participate and while we may have different roles, there is no hierarchy, no elite.

Ministry is something all the people of God are engaged in – one body, many parts.

We each have a role to play, a calling to work out, and together the ministry of the church is exercised.

We need each other and no-one has precedence over anyone else, despite our differing roles.

In fact, the Christian tradition has long affirmed that it may well be from the least likely places that the church will be led into God's purposes.

When Ananias receives his message from God that Saul was the chosen instrument to spread his Good News to the Gentiles, he was incredulous.

And who of us wouldn't have been?

Hang on, this is the guy who's persecuting us??

It seems pretty far-fetched.

But everything about the Christian story is.

The Christian faith is always unlikely, unexpected, and its theology of leadership is no different.

Jesus calls fisherman and tax collectors, says 'The first shall be last and the last first.'

Paul writes, 'When I am weak, then I am strong and we have this treasure in jars of clay.'

The saviour dies rather than conquers and is raised.

For all of us who minister together in Jesus' name, holding to this descending way of Christ, this self-offering way, is the greatest challenge of all.

**The temptation for us all and for the church in general, and it is often a subtle one, is to default away from a truly Christian way of being, doing, and thinking.**

It's so different, so unlikely, we can easily slip into a reliance on other paradigms which are more prevalent in our world, and frankly more reasonable.

Paul ran into this with his Corinthian Christians who felt his style was not up to the standards of leadership they expected, standards based, of course, on what the wider culture said was important.

He was not eloquent, he was not impressive in stature or authority.

He was not rich or well connected.

He had no power, credentials, connections with which to commend himself, just the message of God's love revealed in a crucified and risen saviour.

'Jews look for signs, Gentiles for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified', he wrote elsewhere, 'a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.'

Paul was determined to retain the truly Christian character of his ministry and this meant resisting pressure to conform to worldly ideals of leadership.

So he seems angular, different, eccentric, odd.

How strange does it sound to hear him say, 'We always carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.'

He reaffirms over and over again, 'We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord.'

'If our message is veiled', he says, 'it is veiled to those who are perishing.'

He sought unswerving allegiance to Christ in all things, whatever pressures he faced inside or outside the church.

**The challenge of Paul's day was not that dissimilar to our own in the 21C church.**

The church falls prey to the temptation of defaulting into wider cultural ways of thinking, being, and doing, and relegating the sacrificial way of Christ to just another worldview among many.

And we find non-theological ways to rationalise it which is usually more about self-interested pragmatics than anything.

We convince ourselves that in order to challenge worldly power we need to obtain it first.

Better call our leaders CEOs so the world knows who's in charge. (WM CEO)

In order to engage with worldly politics we need to learn the language of lobbyists or they won't listen.

To engage with the corporate world we need financial clout behind us so as to get a seat at the table.

Seminaries decided pastoral care was more about psychology than loving presence.

Candidates were given thoroughgoing lessons in organisational theory and group dynamics.

Ministry became about management.

Ministers convinced themselves (and I've certainly been guilty of this) that success is measured in terms of bigger congregations, bigger numbers, more influence, which doesn't sound all that different to a corporate growth strategy.

We replaced sanctuaries with auditoriums.

These are the kinds of temptations which exist all around us.

It's not that insights cannot be drawn from different disciplines and contexts, of course they can.

Christian belief can quite comfortably accommodate the insights of secular disciplines like modern science, philosophy, psychology etc.

All truth is in the end God's truth we believe.

Paul makes use of rhetoric and imagery common to his time in getting the Christian message across.

No, it's about what frame of reference shapes our thinking and acting.

What grounds our identity.

Do we read the world and its comings and goings through the Christian story, or the other way around?

Is theology, for instance, little more than sociology with some God stuff thrown in?

Group dynamics with a divine veneer?

**It's difficult because it can happen so subtly.**

For a church like ours, perhaps the main temptation which can creep in is a kind of practical atheism.

We may not think we do this, but the temptation is to exist as if it doesn't matter whether God does.

That is, we imagine that the church is really something like a club or social group, rather than the body of Christ called into the world to minister in his name.

The ministry we share together becomes more like keeping the peace than proclaiming the good news that Jesus is risen from the dead (which he is).

We become a group of people who are merely nice to each other and the prophetic presence of the risen Lord which we should experience as an unsettling presence as much as anything, is domesticated, put in a box.

And when that happens, very quickly we find we can convince ourselves that that's the sum of all faith and ministry, a kind of bland willingness to be nice.

Don't ruffle feathers within or beyond the church and all will be well.

Pair this back, and what it reveals is in fact a kind of polite self centredness, a will to control who we are and how we will be.

Jesus you can't really mean take nothing for the journey but your message of saving love?

Not really?

After all, we have reputations and livelihoods and a whole network of friendly acquaintances to maintain.

**The Dutch American Catholic Priest Henri Nouwen wrote a little book called *In the Name of Jesus* where he reflected on what the future of Christian leadership and ministry would look like.**

And his main contention is that the church and its ministry must go from seeing itself as leading to being led.

Must go from seeing itself as being in charge, to being charged by Jesus with walking the descending path of ministry to the cross, of truly being together in loving community as God's people.

Nouwen was an ecclesial superstar.

He lectured at the most prestigious universities in the world, was widely published and acclaimed as a spiritual and theological writer.

He was at the top of his game and the very picture of success.

And yet he had this nagging feeling that it was an empty success, a succumbing to the ideals of the world, even though it was being lived out in the church (there's a prophetic word for all of us).

After much soul searching he left Harvard University and went to live in a community of developmentally disabled people which was part of the L'Arche network founded by his friend Jean Vanier.

Here he found a community which far more closely resembled the humble way of Christ and the call to be in community.

His many credentials and glowing international reputation meant nothing to those he now lived in community with day by day.

What he found instead was a people who trusted and relied upon each other every minute for whom the life of sacrificial love was all that was required.

Nouwen found that he had now become the student and his teachers were the friends he was making all around him in the community.

They were the hands and feet of Christ leading him into truth.

He had to re-learn what it meant to be Christian.

In his book he makes mention of the words we heard read in our own service here last week from John 21 where Jesus says to Peter, ‘When you were young you put on your belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go.’

‘These words... touch the core of Christian leadership’, he writes, ‘and are spoken to offer us ever and again new ways to let go of power and follow the humble way of Jesus.’

After joining the L’Arche community, Nouwen always took at least one member with him when he spoke at conferences and the like.

What he offered no longer made any sense without his companions.

They were his teachers and he was incomplete without them.

**Today as we have commissioned elders, those charged with a particular ministry of prayer, presence, participation, and pastoral care among us, we are reminded that for all of us faith and service is about being led by Jesus.**

‘Jesus has a different vision of maturity;’, Nouwen writes, ‘it is the ability and willingness to be led where you would rather not go.’

Thinking, being, and doing Christianly, is hard as so many other ways seem more palatable or reasonable or comfortable or attractive.

Subtly or otherwise, we can easily slip into thinking and acting as if it doesn’t really matter at all whether Jesus walked among us, lived, died, and was resurrected.

And whether he still calls us today into his way of love.

This is, in the end, about our very human appetite to see ourselves as leaders, rather than those being led, as masters, rather than servants.

Paul was right to say that we are jars of clay; fragile, broken, and incomplete.

Yet even this, even us, God uses to show the world his all surpassing glory in the face of a saviour who was broken for us.

Learning to live and minister this way is what faith is all about.

And that requires allegiance to Jesus in everything.

This is the hardest thing on earth, but we do it together.

We pick each other up when we fall, we break bread and sing and rejoice, and in the heart of it all we see the loving face of God who never lets us go, who leads us home.

This is indeed all it means to be Christian.

And to hold to the rock who is Jesus the Lord.

Amen.