

5 Pentecost, Proper 9, Yr. A

July 5, 2020

Zechariah 9:2-12, Matthew 11; 16-19, 25-30

The reading from Zechariah and the segment from Matthew both touch on leadership. In Matthew, Jesus, frustrated by some of the “intelligentsia” of his time, compares them to perverse children who will not play no matter what. There are those who were dissatisfied with John whose message was too harsh and demanding, and they are equally dissatisfied with Jesus’ message, which they find too gentle. John, they said, was too ascetic, Jesus is too much of a partier. And maybe it wasn’t that he was eating and drinking, but that he was doing it with the WRONG people. Nothing is right and, as we ourselves know, when people don’t want to hear something, any excuse will do. And perhaps out of his frustration with the stubborn refusal exhibited by some of the Scribes and Pharisees to hear him, Jesus says: I THANK YOU FATHER...BECAUSE YOU HAVE HIDDEN THESE THINGS FROM THE WISE AND THE INTELLIGENT AND HAVE REVEALED THEM TO INFANTS. Perhaps “infants” here is best understood as people who have child-like hearts, who are still open to wonder and trust, to humility and openness and acceptance and to absolute honesty. We all remember that it was a small boy who pointed out that

the emperor was naked while all the adult courtiers denied the truth right before their eyes.

But it goes without saying that Jesus is not weighing in against those God-given gifts of wisdom and intelligence. But he may be saying that intelligence is not enough to really “get” the good news of the Gospel. You need those child-like qualities as well. Because if you think you have all the answers, you are not going to be open to listening or to change.

Jesus has a vision of the in-breaking Kingdom of God, but the leaders of his day didn't want to hear it.

With that in mind, let's look at the Zechariah reading, which is more clearly about leadership. When we hear this reading, we are tempted to immediately jump to Palm Sunday and think of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, but Zechariah was probably writing after the exile during the time when the foundation of the 2nd temple was laid but before its completion. The reading was intended for encouragement and a reminder of their messianic hopes. Rejoice, he says, your king is coming to you. And then he lists some adjectives to describe this king, this leader. He will be triumphant and victorious, but also humble. Hmmm. That doesn't seem to go together very well. And then, emphasizing humility, he says the King is going to be riding on a donkey. It's been pointed out that donkeys in that culture had to do with life: they worked on the land, they carried people and goods to market. War

horses were entirely different. As the name implies, they were about the business and destruction of war. This coming king is going to be about peace, not war. He will cut off the chariots and the war horses and the battle bows. The vision is one of the end of war – a vision of universal peace.

Amos, an earlier prophet, said that without a vision, the people would perish. There's clearly a vision here: peace over war, restoration over destruction, hope over despair. This is the Messianic vision and it's the

same vision that Jesus preaches. And the message is the imperative for Jews and for Christians.

But it's clear from the Matthew reading, that the message isn't always heard let alone followed, at least at the time portrayed in the gospel. At the same time as I was working on this sermon, the group that is reading *Christ in Crisis* was reading a chapter on power and the question there, as here, is **WHAT MAKES A GOOD LEADER?**

If you back that up a bit, maybe the first question is **WHAT IS A LEADER. I didn't look this up, but I'm thinking that the answer has to be that a leader is someone with a vision who can gather followers. But, if you think about it, there are leaders with visions and followers who have proven to be evil. Think of Hitler and Stalin, both leaders, one a rabid racist filled with**

hate and the other a paranoid manipulator. But they both had plenty of followers. Somehow they spoke to the fears and anxieties and the dark parts of many souls. As someone has said, they were able to pick up on what was out there and tap into it. And we all know where that leadership and those visions took us.

But there are also good leaders. In the Wallis book, he talks about Jesus's vision of the kingdom as one that moved people, in Lincoln's language, toward the better angels of their natures. Jesus was the servant leader who washed the feet of his disciples, and who told them that that was what they were to do for others. It's a very different vision, of the leader who has the vision of life and peace.

Because it's the 4th of July, we should remind ourselves of the vision of the founders which was to set aside self-interest to construct a society which would allow everyone to live together in peace and harmony. That was the vision set out in the Hebrew Scriptures as well – that egalitarian community in which everyone mattered, everyone had a seat at the table, everyone was heard. They didn't always achieve it, but that was the vision.

In these days when we are reminded certainly that all lives matter but also that black lives which often did NOT matter, do indeed matter, I think it's interesting to recall that Jefferson Davis once said that that the great truth of the south, the physical, philosophical

and moral truth, was that negroes were not equal to whites and that their subordination to the superior white race was their natural and normal condition. That was one vision. On the other side was Lincoln who said if slavery wasn't wrong, nothing was wrong.

Before we close, I'd like to share some examples of leadership with you that come from Robert Coles' book, *Lives of Moral Leadership*. I share these stories because each of them is about what we would perhaps call ordinary people, but ordinary people who had a vision and rose to those occasions in which they could exercise leadership.

The first, which I'm sure you all will remember is that little 6-year old, Ruby Bridges, one of the children sent to integrate a white school, who faced vicious hatred each school day. Ruby didn't think of herself as a leader. She said "I got picked by accident, because we live here and it all happened! When Lady Luck comes and visits, you do your best, Granny says, and then you know in your bones that no way you should let them win over you, because there is all the folks, they're in this with you, the other kids."

One of Ruby's teachers said "You have a real honest talk with yourself and find out who you are and what you really believe is right...and that means you have to act...and you have to convince others to go in the direction you're going....That's how I'd say it: a leader is someone who knows how to persuade others to

keep others company, to stand for the 100 percent right thing to do – and so they’re all walking like strong family does...getting strong on account of each other.”

And a final story about Al Jones in Boston at the time of school integration. Some black parents, who knew that their kids were losing out because of an inferior education, had achieved the right to enroll them in a white school. Mr. Jones was a janitor in a block of apartments. He went to a meeting in which the parents were agonizing over what to do, whether their kids would be safe going to that other part of the city. At those meetings, people were feeling anxious and overwhelmed and uncertain about what to do. He said that at certain point, he just got up and said, “Let’s go,” and that was the beginning of his volunteering to drive a bus to and from the other part of the city so the kids could get to school and home again safely. He said he was scared, but committed and when his minister called him a leader, he objected. “No,” he said, “I’m just offering to drive, that’s all....It’s not for me to call myself fancy, uppity words...so when I asked myself WHY (and my wife asked the same thing) the answer was so that I can sleep at night and so I could look at myself in the mirror and not want to run away in shame: that’s the explanation, for sure.”

So for us: recognition that there are different visions and different leaders and that we are called to choose

the one that will lead to life, to the Kingdom. And then perhaps to ponder when and where we might act as leaders or as one of those followers who walks along like a family member, getting strong on account of each other. Amen.