



Play your own game
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Year A, Ordinary 22
Exodus 3:1-15, Matthew 16:21-28
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There is a small book I really enjoy dipping into from time to time that is titled *Creative Mischief*. The book came to my attention because a small extract from it appeared on my social media feed and it was enough to make me want to read the entire book. The story that grabbed my attention goes like this:

When working for an advertising agency in London,
My head of department commuted in from Brighton every day.
He started reading “*The Exorcist*” on the train.
He told me he thought it was the most evil book he’d ever read.
In fact, he said it was so evil he couldn’t finish it.
So, at the weekend, he went to the end of Brighton pier and threw
it as far as he could, into the ocean.
So I went to a bookshop.
I bought another copy.
Then I ran it under the tap.
And left it in his desk drawer.
For him to find.¹

It is a story that appeals to my sense of humour. Before going any further, for anyone taking an intuitive leap as to why I shared that story this morning, let me just assure you that I am not going to make any connection between someone hurling a book into the ocean, and my recent experience of being hurled into the ocean in Tonga. Just to acknowledge that elephant in the room. One day that story might find its way into a sermon, but not today.

¹ Adapted Dave Trott, *Creative Mischief*, pg.1

I recalled this particular story because I was rereading parts of that book looking for another story. David Trott talks about a time when he had difficulties with colleague at work. It was a very competitive work environment, which created an all too familiar problem. Trott discovered from his manager that one of his colleagues was badmouthing him to other people in the company. The manager talked to him about it because he knew he needed to put an end to the problem but didn't have a good solution.

Trott, who was not terribly interested in the internal politicking going on in the company, suggested that the manager respond by giving the offending colleague a pay rise. The manager was very surprised about this. What the manager failed to grasp was that Trott was already happy with what he was paid and just wanted to get on with the job he was doing. Whether another person was paid more or less than him was of no consequence to him. Trott suspected that the person bad mouthing him was simply desperate to get ahead. Trott, on the other hand, just wanted to get on with doing his job to the best of his ability.

It turned out his strategy was a good one, because as soon as the colleague got a bump in pay he stopped criticising his colleagues behind their backs.

The wisdom Trott offers about this episode is that his surprising suggestion of giving more money to a person who was attacking him, was a deliberate decision to stick to his goals, rather than to get caught up in someone else's agenda. Rather than getting caught up in a personal battle in which he might lose, he found a way to make the problem do away so he could get back to what he wanted to be doing. The solution doesn't really conform to what we might expect in such a situation, but Trott argues, why fight over something that doesn't matter to you at all?

Many people who find themselves in positions of leadership often find that they come under pressure to conform to other

people's expectations. We all have ideas about what would make someone a good politician, a good teacher, a good manager, judge, bishop, police officer, you name it. It's a strange thing that we often choose leaders, not because they will lead us in the best way, but because they are more likely to lead the way we want them to. The challenge for those in leadership positions is to get on with leading, rather than buying in to everyone else's agenda.

Today's gospel reading is about leadership in a number of ways. Firstly, we have the contrast between the way Jesus spoke to Peter last week, as the rock on which the church will be built, and this week where Jesus tells Peter off. Last week Jesus affirmed Peter as an important leader in their new movement, but this week he tells Peter that he is a stumbling block. What is going on?

In the first part of the reading Jesus is doing two things, he is speaking about his role in the community and how he is on a collision course with powerful members of the Jewish community. He is also telling his community that leadership of their group is a shared exercise and cannot be solely focussed on him.

Neither point conforms to Peter's expectations of Jesus. Peter does not want a confrontation with the Jewish elite, if there was to be conflict of any kind Peter may well have wanted it to be with the Romans, not with his own people. And Peter is also shying away from the shared responsibility Jesus has just placed upon him. It's as if he is saying, thanks for treating me as an equal, but I'd rather continue to be a follower. This helps us to understand the strong reproachful words of Jesus. Peter, I have just asked you to stand with me and you respond by shying away from the responsibility just given to you.

If Jesus understood himself as a prophet in the tradition of Moses, it is fair to suggest that he understood the role of a leader to be one of growing a community that was strong enough to lead itself. The law of Moses was designed with two clear things in

mind, that a community must seek to love God and that they must love each other. The community Moses sought to establish was one of radical egalitarianism, a community in which all people knew that they were equal before God. Moses was so convinced that this was what a community needed to be, that ultimately he abdicated his role as a leader in that community in the hope that the community would find ways to guide itself that were more than the vision of a single person.

Similarly, Jesus was growing a new kind of community that was not all about the leadership of a single exceptional person, but rather was an expression of a community's aspirations as a whole.

I believe that one of the strengths of Anglicanism, which is shared by many other Christian denominations, is that while we have a number of expressions of leadership, the primary way in which we gather is as small communities. That is what a parish is. While parishes are no longer constrained by geography in the way they once were, they are still in some sense a local expression of Christianity within a broader community.

While different people will carry out roles of leadership within this community, from being wardens, vestry members, ad hoc dinner organisers, liturgical leaders, parish administrators and a very small and select group of clergy, first and foremost the church is an open community made up of people who have chosen to be here. Leaders come and go, but the community endures. The only way that is certain is if each member of this community plays their part. And there are many roles to play, from attending services, offering leadership, donating to the parish to help fund mission and ministry, participating in the rosters, and the all-important work of offering hospitality. And of course, it is your job to seek out those members of the wider community who don't know that there is a place for them here. Because there are people out there who might just be waiting for your invitation. Amen.