

Readings: Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Text: Matthew 22:9 – ‘Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’

Theme: *Leadership in times of crisis: experience has shown that crisis often reveals real leaders and shows up the true leadership qualities that are in all of us.*

The world has known a plethora of well-known leaders throughout history. Some for the great things they had done for humanity and some for the evil that they did.

I am sure you have your favourite leaders, and leaders that cause you to cringe by the mere mention of their names.

When we think and talk about leaders, we tend to think about political and military leaders due to a number of reasons. But leaders come in many shapes and forms, when we think of leaders as those that head human organisations.

I always think of a leader, however, as someone who can affect the ways other people live their lives and the relationships that they make, because of the qualities of their characters and personalities that people want to emulate.

In that sense then, anyone can be a leader. Indeed, all of us can be leaders if we listen to Jesus’ criteria where the last can be first, and the first can be last. It is all about the leadership qualities that we possess, especially when we are subjected to life’s tests in times of crisis.

All the lectionary readings for today touch on the issue of leadership. I have decided, however, to focus on three: the readings from Exodus, Philippians and Matthew. All these readings reveal different kind of leaders and different leadership qualities in times of crisis.

In the reading from Exodus, Aaron is directly facing a crisis, and Moses and God are also caught up in this crisis. Moses has been gone for a while to receive the written law from God on mount Sinai, and Aaron is left to look after the people.

When Moses takes a while to return, the people become impatient. They say to Aaron, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us.”

And Aaron says, [my paraphrase], ‘Yes, yes. Give me all the gold jewelleries of your wives and your children.’ And they do.

Aaron takes the gold from the people, perhaps dropping a few in his pouch. He forms the gold in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they say, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

Meanwhile, God is watching from the top of the Mountain; and God is not happy. God says to Moses [my paraphrase again], "Hey Moses. Better go down at once, mate! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted rebelliously. I am very angry and I am going to destroy them.”

But Moses implores God, saying [my paraphrase], "Common God. Why are you so angry against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt?" They are pointing a finger at each other, accusing each other for bringing the people out of Egypt. "Turn from your fierce wrath," said Moses. "Change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people," Moses continues.

Amazingly, the Lord changes his mind about the disaster that he plans against Israel.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul himself is in a crisis. He is in custody, and many questions seem to be crossing his mind. He is feeling tired, perhaps fairly old by now, and he would even welcome death. But he realises that the communities that he had established still need his voice. So, he decides to soldier on.

In today's passage, Paul is encouraging the church in Philippi to stand firm in their faith and to support the leaders, which include a number of women. He says to them, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice,' (v.4).

And so we come to the gospel reading for today. What a weird and convoluted story.

If you feel recoiled at hearing this story, apparently told by Jesus, be comforted by the fact that you are not alone. Some have called it a terrible story, and others have labelled it an ugly story. Let us listen again.

A king was having a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. He sent the slaves again, but the people made light of it and went away; one to his farm, another to his business, while the others seized the slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. Enraged, the king sent his troops to destroy the people that killed his servants, and burned their city.

Faced with the crisis of not filling the banquet hall with people, a situation that would bring shame to him and his family, something that he could ill afford in a society fixated with honour and shame, the king told his slaves to go out, and invite everyone they could find.

The slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad. The wedding hall was filled with guests, and the king was greatly relieved. But one guest, a man, did not wear a wedding robe, which would have been provided at the main entrance.

The king said to him, "Mi Amigo, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?"

The man was perplexed; he could not say a word.

Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

How about that as a picture of God's kingdom? Darkness; weeping; and gnashing of teeth! What happened to the love and compassion of the kingdom?

There are a few things that we need to say about this parable as well as some questions. First, this wedding, without any doubt, is not a Samoan wedding. Samoans never turn down a wedding invitation, let alone to a royal wedding. In fact, you don't need to send out an invitation. The Samoans will just come to a feast, invited or not.

The question is, who in their right mind will turn down an invitation to a royal wedding? Let us say, to the wedding of prince George in 20 years from now? I know for sure that, Tony Abbot would not. He has already worked himself into position by taking an ‘unpaid job’ with the British government. But, there had been a precedent for turning down a British Royal honour.

According American writer, Scott Anderson, in his book called, *Lawrence of Arabia*, King George the 5th and Queen Mary summoned Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence to Buckingham Palace on October 30, 1918.

Lawrence was 30 at the time. He thought he was invited to map out the new boundaries for the Arabs whom he had helped to liberate from the Ottoman Empire. The invitation, however, was to make him a Knight. When he realised what the occasion was about, he turned and walked out of Buckingham Palace, leaving King George and Queen Mary stunned and confused.

But what can we do with the ugly story in Matthew’s gospel? Is there salvation in this story?

Well, as they say in biblical interpretation, it all depends on the context and the kind of eyes that you may have. And as the saying goes, ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’; and this ugly story has beauty, but concealed in the way it is told.

To uncover that beauty, you need to read the sermon on the mount again; or may be more than once. Second, remember Jesus had been dead for around 50 years by the time Matthew wrote his gospel. Moreover, Matthew is writing for his community, and not for us. With that information in hand, I would start analysing the parable by reading story from the end.

Consider the guest who violated accepted conventions and was thrown out for not wearing a wedding robe. Who might he be? Do you know of someone who usually flouts conventions? Is it possible that he is Isaiah’s suffering servant? (Is. 53).

If you think about it, the story does not make sense as a model of God’s kingdom unless it is a story about what happened to Jesus. As I said before, Jesus saw his community and the church as a family, and he would not exclude anyone, no matter how obnoxious they might be. He would do anything to bring people into the community.

So, the story reflects Matthew’s community and the early church, where people who did not conform or did not agree with the power that be, were thrown out. So this is Matthew’s story, a reworking of a parable that Jesus might have told.

It reminds us about the beauty of Jesus’ leadership where he would suffer for our sake, in contrast to the leadership of the king who was mean and vindictive when he faced the likelihood of being shamed for not filling the banquet hall and for allowing people who were not properly clothed to stay.

We also heard in the Exodus readings about Aaron behaving like a politician when the people rebelled. And we heard about Moses’ ability to advocate for the people despite their rebellious nature. And in the reading from Philippians, we heard Paul continuing to advocate for the leadership in the church in Philippi, despite him being in custody.

Which of these leaders do you identify with? Aaron? Moses? Paul? Jesus? the King? All of the above?

Leaders always have to change because situations change and one style will not work under varying circumstances. So it is likely that one may have to play all these kind of leaders as the situations demand.

Crisis always reveals real leaders and shows up the true leadership qualities that are in all of us. This happens because we are being forced to make decisions, some of them may not be very popular, but we know they will yield good outcomes. I think, apart from Fox News and the *The Australian* newspaper, there is strong agreement that our leaders have done quite well in mitigating the spread of the corona virus, as compared to the machomen of the US, UK and Brazil.

For us, the church, we are also facing the crisis of declining membership. I did not hear people considering this an issue, when we were making decisions with little concern about people leaving the church. But we all have to work together now to build a church that is truly inclusive. One that values all people, whether they are wearing the right uniform or not. A church that welcomes people and does not throw people out.

All of us are leaders and we all have leadership qualities that we can use to advance God's salvation work on earth. Let us work together to promote our church at all levels, starting with our Wesley, church family.

Remember, our leaders and our leadership styles can attract people to Wesley, but they can also alienate people, especially when we are facing a crisis.

Always think about how Jesus might lead and act under those circumstances.

For the glory of God.
Amen.