

## When Credibility Crumbles

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 28 September 2014, by David Gill. The readings were Exodus 17:1-7, Philippians 2:1-13 and St Matthew 21:23-32.*

Moses was having a bad day. It was the latest in a whole string of bad days.

Things had gone well for a while. He had managed to get his little band of former slaves out of Egypt. Somehow – miraculously, they said – he had organised their escape from Pharaoh's pursuing army. But now the Hebrews were wandering in the wilderness. And they were not a happy bunch of wanderers.

The Sinai region was harsh. Food was hard to find. Their leader didn't seem to have much of an idea about where they were going. Now the last straw. They had arrived at Rephidim ... and there was no water.

A dry tap in Sydney is a minor inconvenience. A dry well in Sinai was a possible death sentence. Moses' people had good reason to worry.

"Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" they complain. "To kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" Even God gets dragged into the grumbling. "Is the Lord among us or not?" they want to know.

Rebellion in the ranks. Moses is a worried man. He goes off and talks to the Lord about his problems. "What shall I do with this people?" he asks. "They're almost ready to stone me".

And God's response? He tells Moses, in effect, not to get his knickers in a knot. I have not abandoned you, he says. Go on ahead to Horeb, and there you will find the water you need. Moses goes, he finds, and his people are satisfied. His authority survives. Why? Not because he has dreamt up some ploy to restore his popularity. But because, with confidence in the divine purpose, he presses on to do what he believes to be the will of God. He trusts and obeys.

It is a story with which church leaders today can all too readily identify. I once led a bible study on this passage for the national heads of churches. When our reading reached the verse "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me" I glanced up at my eminent congregation. Every one of those archbishops, moderators-general, Salvation Army territorial commanders, presidents and what-nots had a rueful look on his or her face. The expressions said a lot. They all knew the feeling!

In many countries, and in most denominations, church decision-making structures are under question. Christians are asking: who is exercising authority in the Church, who should be exercising such authority, and how should they go about it when they do?

Some years ago, an evening of songs and prayers from the Taizé Community was organised for St James' Anglican Church, just along the road. Among the hundreds of young people present I bumped into Cardinal Clancy, then Sydney's Roman Catholic archbishop. "Your Eminence!" I said. "What's a guy like you doing among all these wild Protestants?"

"David," he replied, "it's not wild Protestants that worry me. It's wild Catholics that are giving me sleepless nights!"

His denomination is not the only one arguing about who calls the shots.

The Uniting Church, for example, has its so-called Assembly of Confessing Congregations, people who are unhappy about some of the decisions taken by our National Assembly. Ancient Orthodox churches are painfully scarred by the strife that complicates dealings within and between their various jurisdictions. Anglicans are in a constant state of wonderment that their church holds together at all. The list goes on.

Skin and hair is flying in many churches as they face pressure to rethink the issue of authority: where it is located, how the whole people of God participates in its exercise, in what manner it should be expressed, and how the inevitable dissidents are to be coped with.

The big stick approach just doesn't work anymore. And thank God it doesn't.

Australia's well-known wariness of authority figures may help us here. It should encourage churches in this country to rediscover a style of leadership that dialogues rather than dictates, that listens more than it speaks, that relies on good sense not coercion, that is ministerial rather than magisterial, that tries to live the logic of the gospel.

For starters, those involved in leadership roles in other denominations might do well to adopt one of the traditional titles of the Pope: *Servus Servorum Dei*, Servant of the Servants of God. Of course, popes haven't always lived up to their title -- any more than those of us labelled Reverend have lived up to ours! But it's a great title, and in so many ways Pope Francis, thank God, is making it live again.

The problem is not just how leaders behave, how decision-makers go about their deciding. Today's challenge to authority goes far beyond that.

You may remember that, two Sundays ago, I showed you a beautiful picture of St Stephen's which I was about to carry to Hong Kong, a gift to Kowloon Union Church (KUC) as last Sunday it celebrated its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The gift was well received, as I hope was my exhortation that all KUC people who visit Sydney must stop by and worship with us at St Stephen's.

In return, they gave me a picture of Kowloon Union Church. A picture with a difference. One of KUC's computer hotshots had composed it using lots of very small photos taken through the decades. Photos they had collected of people, so many people, who in good times and in bad had formed that congregation. You need a magnifying glass to recognise anyone, but the idea is what matters, not the recognition.

That picture says something important, something that matters for St Stephen's no less than KUC. It says the Church is not archbishops and theologians and local clergy, not bricks and mortar and leaking front windows, not pews and organ pipes and budget shortfalls. The Church is ... us!

So if the Church has a credibility problem today – and it surely does – the problem is ours, not someone else's. We cannot not lay the problem at another door. Oh yes, we wince when a church leader says something silly, when clergy misbehave, when people with more fervour than common sense proclaim their particular prejudice on some current issue as being *the* Christian view. Yes, we are embarrassed when so-called Evangelicals, particularly in the United States, blend their faith so comfortably with a far-right approach to human relationships, family structures, economic policy, political allegiance and world affairs.

We wince and we're embarrassed by some of the things said and done in the name of Christianity – just, incidentally, as our Muslim cousins wince and are embarrassed by some of the things said and done in the name of Islam. But we bear the name of Christ. The problem is ours. We are called to bear witness to him with all the credibility we can muster.

That obligation presses you and me, and the two billion plus believers like us to focus anew on the servant Christ, to be taught by him a lifestyle befitting his servant people.

What might such a refocus bring us to see?

For clues about that, you can't go past the guidance St Paul gave long ago to the Christians in Philippi. We heard it in this morning's second reading.

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," he urged. By "the same mind" the author did not mean have the same ideas, share the same opinions, believe exactly the same things. He meant let your life be driven by the same dynamic of self-emptying love.

Driven by self-emptying love. Like those gentiles who, in Hitler's Germany, started wearing the Jewish star of David. Like those non-Muslim women who, in today's Sydney, have started wearing the Muslim hijab. Like the God who, long ago, lived our life and died our death.

Self-emptying love is a tough call for us at St Stephen's, with our vice-regal pews, plaques commemorating visits by assorted royals and governors, memories of prime ministers and other VIPs worshipping with us, flags and regimental colours, civic events of one kind and another that take place here. Links with the Establishment are part of this congregation's corporate memory.

Such links with the powerful are valid and necessary. The Church has a job to do there, as in every other sector of society. But those links can be dangerous, because if we're not very careful they can seduce us into an understanding of greatness that has nothing whatever to do with the gospel of Christ.

In a few minutes we will come to the blessing of the flowers. They will be taken from here to people who can worship with us no longer because of illness, disability or age. We're not doing this because we've given up on Christianity and are now promoting flowers. It is not a public relations exercise. And it won't bring us any kudos, with the powers that be or anyone else.

We're doing this to point towards a different kind of greatness: gospel greatness. The flowers will invite recipients to look beyond themselves, beyond St Stephen's, to the mighty caring and self-giving of God.

Self-emptying love: God's nature and our calling.

Work on such caring, Paul urged the Philippians. Why? "For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure". Think about that, next time you find yourself fretting about the Church's credibility.

Focus on the One who, against all the odds, is able to do something profoundly significant within and through us. The One who still uses the most unlikely people – like Moses, yes even like us – to take forward the divine purpose.

There is a beautiful prayer offered in the Uniting Church worship book for this Sunday. It goes like this.

*O God,  
you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity:  
Grant us the fullness of your grace,  
that we, running to obtain your promises,  
may become partakers of your heavenly treasure;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.*

Amen Lord. Amen.

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