

True Leaders/False Leaders

Sexagesima (2nd Sunday before Lent) and St. Matthias (Feb. 24th)

(From the Sexagesima Epistle: 2 *Corinthians xi. 19 ff.*, the St. Matthias Collect, and excerpts from the St. Matthias Epistle, and Gospel, *Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 233-235)

2 Corinthians 11:19 *For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise. 20 For ye suffer , if a man bring you into bondage , if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself , if a man smite you on the face. 21 I speak as concerning reproach, as though we had been weak . Howbeit whereinsoever any is bold , (I speak foolishly ,) I am bold also. 22 Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I. 23 Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. 24 Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. 25 Thrice was I beaten with rods , once was I stoned , thrice I suffered shipwreck , a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; 27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. 28 Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily , the care of all the churches. 29 Who is weak , and I am not weak ? who is offended , and I burn not? 30 If I must needs glory , I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities. 31 The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not.*

From the Propers For St. Matthias:

Acts 1:23 *And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed , and said , Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen , 25 That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell , that he might go to his own place. 26 And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.*

Matthew 11:25 *At that time Jesus answered and said , I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. 26 Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.*

This year the pre-Lenten Sunday called “Sexagesima” (approximately 60 days before Easter) is five days before the feast day of St. Matthias (Feb. 24th). The scriptures and prayers associated with these two days contain a common theme: the nature of godly church leadership. Throughout the latter chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul defends his apostleship to a group of believers who had been seduced and captured by a powerful and convincing little gang of false apostles. Paul, in asserting the genuineness of his own ministry, can obviously not resort to the same tactics that his opponents have used in gaining authority, since to do so would destroy his argument. St. Matthias, not numbered among the band of the twelve original apostles, who first appears in Acts 1 during the earliest days of the Church, does not possess their renown. We know nothing about him except that his appointment had been committed to prayer. He is God’s pick. As we shall see, Christian leadership is supposed to operate by a set of principles in absolute op-

position to those that govern how the world chooses its leaders. Great harm is done the church when dominance, power, personality, intellectual ability, and raw talent rule the day.

The Corinthians church was ripe for bogus rulers. They had become a sort of Christian aristocracy, known for their multiplied spiritual gifts which lent them an air of being very close to God, a super-spiritual model congregation, the very best thing going. They must have basked in the admiration and reverence they received from a host of smaller, less successful provincial churches. In a sea of “have nots” they were among the few and privileged “haves”. Paul had tried desperately hard to deal with their developing conceit in an earlier letter:

1 Cor. 8 Now ye are full , now ye are rich , ye have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God ye did reign , that we also might reign with you. 9 For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. 10 We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised.

But it seems that these and similar appeals failed to reach their mark. After all, for such a superior group, nothing less than the very best was acceptable. Perhaps they had grown tired of St. Paul's continual admonitions to humility. Perhaps they were embarrassed by the Apostle's apparent deficiency of appearance and speech, his ugly scars that were the marks of his persecution, his unconcern with rhetorical flourish, his almost childlike simplicity and lack of self-consciousness, and his indifference to bearing and affect. Where once he had been received as their spiritual father, he had become a liability to a church that was bent on “going places”. Maybe their search for leaders appropriate to such an attitude actually involved a formal appeal like the help-wanted ads we read today in religious magazines that are decked higher than a wedding cake with wished-for qualities in a minister. Or perhaps the false apostles, wandering from church to church as they were wont (and still are wont) to do, looking for an easy gig with lots of perks, just happened to pick up the scent of the Corinthians' arrogance, and practically broke the door down to answer the call.

These new leaders knew how to deliver the goods, no doubt. They spoke well. They were impressive in appearance, with fists full of diplomas, degrees, and certifications. Their prominence in the community promised to remove the awful curse associated with being labelled a *Christian*. The hated religion could now be made popular and even an indicator of social status. And surely all of that would help “bring people to Jesus”, wouldn't it? Doubtless the church paid a high price for the Cadillac preachers they welcomed in. We can only imagine what demands these leaders made in turn for their services. They would only have expected remuneration commensurate with their quality. But their true colors would soon have been made apparent:

For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise. For ye suffer , if a man bring you into bondage , if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself , if a man smite you on the face.

It is the height of self-deception and servile self-abasement when a company of Christians puts up with such abuse, but we know that it happens all the time.

The symbiotic, but highly dysfunctional relationship that can develop between spiritually immature congregations and those whom they've brought in to fill in the vacuum for leadership is surely diabolical. When we are shamed and humiliated and degraded by a minister, we often feel we deserve it. He says he is speaking for God, and we have no effective way of countering his claim. Unless we have some sort of recourse to higher ecclesial authority to help us right the wrong, the abuse of power goes on unchecked and even increases. We feel that we are somehow atoning for our sins by submitting to such overlordship. And individuals who have an unchecked appetite for controlling others find such a situation to be better than Heaven itself. The insecurity of the church dovetails ingeniously with the insecurity of the leader. It is a dreadful place of bondage and misery, repeated far too often.

So what is true leadership? How is it evidenced? Perhaps we should begin by asserting that it takes a mature congregation to recognize a mature leader. Why do we say this? Because the properties of godly leadership must be spiritually discerned. They may not be obvious. They may well be subtle. They may be unconnected with external qualities that easily recommend one individual to others, especially in such a superficial time as ours, that is so consumed with image, and how one *presents* oneself to another. The Apostle Paul absolutely refused to play the cheap games his opponents used well, even if it meant his apparent defeat and humiliation before the very believers he so deeply loved and for whom he had given his life. Either they saw it --the truth of real, sincere godly ministry-- or they didn't. What could the Apostle do? He might appeal to them, but he certainly couldn't force them to open their eyes and make an honest assessment of the men they had hired, and the apostle they had spurned. He knew that of all lessons in life, this was among those which simply *must* be learned by the individuals involved themselves. What was his reward as he waited upon them to come to their senses? Certainly much heartache, sadness, frustration, anger, and apart from faith in the God who *works all things after the counsel of His will* (Ephesians 1:11), even despair.

And surely St. Matthias, a relative unknown, is another example of such an unlikely choice for the very highest position of authority, that of an apostle, within Christ's Church. He replaces the awful character of Judas, certainly among the most paradoxical of figures in all of human history. Judas had walked with Christ. He had been among those few who had the unrepeatable privilege of day-to-day contact with the Son of God, who would have viewed Christ's actions in every instance of his earthly ministry, who would have had imprinted in the deepest place of his soul the personal reality of that One who was the perfect combination of humanity and deity. But Judas somehow became the judge of Christ Himself. The best wasn't good enough

for Judas. He forfeited a role for which he would have been eminently qualified as one of those who was among the Lord's intimates --to have been an emissary for the Gospel-- a role to which St. Matthias, elected from outside the intimate circle of the Twelve, was ultimately appointed.

What are some practical lessons that can be drawn from these scriptural examples? Qualifications for Church leadership may well be based upon qualities that are essentially invisible, except with those *with eyes to see and ears to hear*. The Apostle's life appears to have been principally characterized by suffering. Suffering does not make people look attractive. It leaves lines in the face, and even deeper etchings in the soul and the heart. Sufferers have scars and wounds, some of them still unhealed. But there is a world of difference between godly suffering --that which is endured for Christ's sake-- and that suffering which is common to all men. The former is a condition that is voluntarily taken on. Christ does not force Christian duty upon anyone. He does not compel any soul to love Him, and to endure everything that will be the inevitable result of loving Him, for it is simply impossible to *love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength* (Matt. 12:30) without suffering. It is this added dimension of service to Christ that sets apart the devoted Christian. But the paradox is this: you may well fail to see this quality in others, and in leaders especially, unless you yourself possess it.

The lure of acceptability in the eyes of others is enormous. None of us likes to be marginalized, to be thought of as odd, old-fashioned, or weird. We will do almost anything to avoid being put in such a position. But this places us at direct odds with the scriptural and historical experience of what it means to be a follower of Christ. It is best to learn to accept our status as *different: Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you* (1 John 3:13). The cost of being unwilling to embrace this difficult fact will ultimately prove far higher than the temporary benefit we gain from ignoring it. To be ignored by Heaven is far worse than being forgotten by the world!

It is a great shame that the Apostle had to sell himself to his own flock! Surely, when they came to their senses, they must have been deeply humiliated. We must do each other the favor of viewing one other through spiritual glasses, as it were. They will both filter out the things we tend to criticize, and allow us to see those things --those critically important things-- we would otherwise miss.

Let us close with the Collect for St. Matthias' Day:

O ALMIGHTY God, who into the place of the traitor Judas didst choose thy faithful servant Matthias to be of the number of the twelve Apostles: Grant that thy Church, being always preserved from false Apostles, may be ordered and guided by faithful and true pastors; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.