The Model for Christian Leaders

Lawrence E. Frizzell, Seton Hall University
The Model for Christian Leaders

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ

This article was previously published in The Catholic Advocate.
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday Readings for July 19, 2009 for Cycle B:
Jer 23:1-6; Ps 23; Eph 2:13-18; Mk 6:30-34

THE MODEL FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS

Lawrence E. Frizzell

What would you list as the greatest needs of our Church and society today? Some of us would focus on particular problems and wish for a solution. Perhaps others would point to the need for wise and courageous leaders. Don't many tragic problems arise from a lack of direction in the lives of many people?

The prophets of ancient Israel arose in response to inadequacy on the part of the kings, priests and judges of a given time. The dynastic leaders and their appointed judges failed in teaching and/or in their example. Jeremiah castigated the shepherds of his day and, through him God promised a better future. After the Exile (587 BCE), "I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold..." (Jer 23:3).

When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon visited Jerusalem in 597 BCE, he deposed Jehoiakim the king of Judah and set up his uncle, Mattaniah, as his puppet. To show his power, Nebuchadnezzar changed the man's name to Zedekiah (meaning "Yahweh is my Righteousness"). Manipulated by Babylon, this man failed to live up to the meaning of his name. Under the threat of Jerusalem's destruction and the exile of survivors, Jeremiah echoes God's ancient promise to King David. If those anointed to succeed him failed, God would send his anointed One (Messiah) par excellence. The people must not give up hope for proper governance! "Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch (see Is 11:1-3) and he shall reign and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel dwell in peace. This is the name he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness'" (Jer 23:5-6). The Hebrew name "YHWH Zedekainu" is clearly playing on the name Zedekiah. Righteousness calls for right order in society in imitation of God, and this implies integrity. The righteous shoot from the Davidic dynasty will bring justice in the order of daily life and the ideal of integrity will be experienced in a new way by God's people. We find that the Gospel is permeated with this perspective; anyone aspiring to any position of leadership in society could do no better than to reflect on the ministry of Jesus.

When the apostles returned from their mission, Jesus invited them to retreat from their manifold activities to get their bearings spiritually. Alas, this effort was futile! People arrived at the place where Jesus sought quiet "and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." How could he ignore their earnest search to satisfy a spiritual hunger? So "he began to teach them many things" (Mk 6:34).
This compassion and the demand to pursue righteousness that Jesus recognized as essential to his mission led him to the cross. If the people of Israel were scattered like sheep at times because their shepherds failed, how much greater was the need of others, "having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12). The compassionate Christ brought them nearby his sacrifice so that he could teach and nourish them. The purpose of his mission and his death was to bring peace among the nations and to reconcile humanity with God so that through him we may have access in one spirit to the Father.

Every person who aspires to political leadership should reflect profoundly on his or her motivations. No one provides a better model than Jesus, who ordered every aspect to his life to compassionate care for others so that they might know God their Father. Only by imitating his model of using authority as an act of service can potential leaders avoid the constant danger of prostituting their position to self-aggrandizement. This point apply to every role of responsibility in adult life, including the vocation of marriage and parenthood, so we all fix attention on the Master. May the Good Shepherd guide us!