

Homily- On this rock I will build my church - Matthew 16; 13-20

Today Scriptures are about leadership and authority. Indeed these words of scripture written thousands of years ago are today being fulfilled in our parish.

The issue of leadership and authority is very much at the forefront of our lives at the moment. On the world scene, we are seeing dictatorships in Libya and Syria and other places being rejected and overthrown. Within our nation, we are seeing constant challenges to the leadership of our politicians, as people question their competence and concern for the national good. Closer to home, we will soon be faced with the dilemma of choosing a state parliamentary leader for our electorate. Fortunately, we have two excellent leaders to select from. Speaking of excellent leadership, we should celebrate the work that one of our parishioners, Professor Michael Good has done in research towards the eradication of malaria. Perhaps you have seen him on television in the newspapers recently. The work he has done could save millions of lives. Thank you Michael. In coming months we will see the appointment of a new Archbishop for us. And, of course, today we celebrate the appointment of Father Vu Dinh Tuong as our new parish priest.

Leadership and Authority in the church, is a precious, and yet fragile gift from God. Many people in our parish share in that exercise of leadership to different degrees as ministers or small group leaders. This leadership is needed to be exercised differently than in some other contexts. In the first instance we need leadership and authority, being invested in someone, rather than having the anarchy or inaction that results when no one exercises leadership. And we need to submit ourselves to authority for the sake of sacred order. That's what the word hierarchy means – *sacred order*. It's not meant to be a "power over others" concept but a means of exercising and maintaining sacred order for the good of all.

Leadership needs to be neither dictatorial, in that a leader imposes their personal will on everyone. Nor need it be democratic in the context where a majority can then impose their will unjustly on a minority. That is the tragic reality of the democratic processes being imposed on the tribal peoples of our region and in the Middle East. What God desires is justice for all.

Appropriate leadership in the church's context, as witnessed in the Scriptures, seeks to call and appoint leaders who will discern God's will, for the good of all; be guided by their actions by the Holy Spirit; and seek to use authority for the empowerment and liberation of others, rather than exercising power and unjust control over them. Sadly, throughout history, some church leaders at all levels have failed in this.

In the first reading, we hear how one leader, Shebna, was removed from his post as minister, due to his self-centered, power seeking behavior, and breaking of the sacred trust that was put in him, to care for his people. Through the recommendation of the prophet Isaiah to the King Hezekiah, a successor, in Eliakum, was chosen, anointed and invested with the robe and sash. He was given the key to the house of David, to be responsible for the welfare of his people.

It's part of our biblical tradition that leaders are called and anointed and with this anointing comes accountability for the appropriate use of leadership, in the care and the building up of God's people, and the leadership of God's mission, in building a better and more just world. Those of us with office in the church must accept this accountability. It's a sacred trust placed in us. I must say it's also hard to please everyone, as sometimes we like Jesus will get unjustly accused.

A different dimension of leadership is reflected the Gospel today. As we have been journeying through Matthew's Gospel, we have come to the point where Jesus decided he had to prepare for a succession of leadership after him.

Today's reading will be followed next week by the second portion of this discourse, where Jesus reveals that the storm clouds are gathering. As a result of his wonderful ministry of teaching and miracles, the powers of evil are seeking to make him suffer and die, and he knows that a succession plan is necessary for his mission to be continued.

He sets the scene for the selection and anointing of a new leader. He poses a simple selection test to the disciples. Who do you say that I am? Simon the fisherman has the perception and courage to respond: you are the Christ, the anointed one, our Messiah. Those three terms are the Greek, English and Hebrew words for the same thing. Jesus knows that God's Spirit has revealed this insight to Simon, and he chooses him as the one who will take over leadership of the mission. Jesus anoints him with the declaration that: you Simon are to be the rock, (in Greek petras or, the Peter), on which I will build my new church... I give you authority, sacred holy order, over this movement of God, and for the welfare of those who would believe. You are to exercise loving stewardship of my people. There were no technical qualifications Simon needed for this job other than belief, and acceptance of the mission.

As daunting as it must have seemed, Peter accepted the keys to the kingdom, and under his leadership, guided by the Holy Spirit, a succession of other leaders grew and multiplied from 12 to 72 to 144,000 and to the 2 billion Christians we have in the world today.

Today we have joyfully come to the point where a leader in the style of Peter has come to continue the mission of God in our parish. Archbishop John Bathersby has appointed Father Tuong as our parish priest: to exercise authority over us, to provide pastoral care for us, to build us up as disciples of Jesus, and send us out into the world on a mission to make our neighborhood and city and state and our neighboring countries, better places. Of course God has already been working in our parish for many years, and we have made many positive differences. We can but are excited at the prospect of what God, Fr Tuong and us, can do together, over the coming years. Whilst Fr Tuong already has a special anointing, all of us here have been anointed for contributing to this mission. At our baptism we were all anointed to share in the ministry of priest prophet and king, according to the gifts God has given us. We are not meant to be passive recipients of ministry – rather co workers with Tuong in God mission.

It's particularly helpful for us to have a man such as Fr Tuong as our new leader, having been trained as a missionary himself by the Jesuits. As we have briefly already heard, Fr Tuong has lived a life, facing many challenges, and has been successful and facing them with courage, deep spirituality, a great sense of humor, and desire to collaborate with others.

Father Tuong. We thank you for accepting the call to become a leader in faith. We thank you for your generosity in giving up your long awaited sabbatical to apply yourself to the healing of our wounds, and the building up of our community. We called, and you have answered, and we warmly receive you as our pastor. Even though you have accepted this appointment with the authority of our Archbishop and with his blessing, please note that we too anoint you, in declaring that we delight in giving you the keys to this parish.

In the words of the psalmist today: We thank you with all our heart and we acclaim you as our priest, prophet, and king. We may not lay our hands upon you, but we put our hands together now in acclamation of our desire to work with you in building God's kingdom in this place.