

PREREQUISITES FOR LEADERSHIP

Text: John 21:15-19
By: Rev Dr Leo Douma
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During my doctoral studies I had to attend seminars in which other doctoral students presented papers on their research. On one occasion I had to sit through a two hour presentation of detailed historical and very technical Greek language analysis. Now I have to confess that there were a number of times that my mind wandered off to other things. You might have experienced the sort of thing as well. Not in my preaching of course. At one stage I was reading the posters on the wall of the lecture room. I spotted a poster that really struck me. It said 'There is not in the universe a more ridiculous nor a more contemptible animal than a proud clergyman.' That is strong. But it's true. Why is that? Because the Bible is full of references telling us that those who would truly serve God must be humble. As Jesus said (Luke 14:11) *"For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* Now this can be at odds with the way things often work. Usually when a person is installed to office a lot of attention is given to the abilities of that person. Usually it is expected that leaders to have the attitude of 'I can do it. Leave it with me'. 'Trust me. I will fix the problems'. 'Here are my promises which I will do. Read my lips'. On these occasions the new office bearer is the centre of attention and they get the honour of the moment. Not so for the installation of a church leader. Yes, it is a time of praise. Not so much for the new office bearers as for the Lord of the church. For the new church leader it is a moment of humility. It is a moment when they are well aware of their shortcomings and their unworthiness. For they see the tremendous responsibility that is given to them. They are to represent Jesus in his church. They are to speak the message of the Lord of the universe. But it is precisely with that attitude of humility that the church leader is most able to do their task. For when they do their ministry in complete devotion and dependence on Jesus then they are most able to fulfil their calling. The American pastor

and author Jim Cymbala once wrote 'I discovered an astonishing truth: God is attracted to weakness. He can't resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him. Our weakness, in fact, makes room for his power.'

That was the lesson that the disciple Peter had to learn. As far as leadership was concerned Peter was a natural. He was a man of action. He didn't sit around indecisive, hesitating, wondering 'Will I or won't I'. He was quick to make up his mind and then go and do something. Here in John 21:3 we note that it was Peter who said *"I am going out to fish"*. He set the lead and the others followed along: *"We will go with you" they said*". In leadership books they ask 'How do you know if you are a leader? Look behind you and see if anyone is following.' Peter lead and the others followed. This is the pattern we notice of Peter throughout the gospels. Peter set the pace. It was Peter who go out of the boat and walked on the water. It was Peter who was quick to defend Jesus with his sword in the garden of Gethsemane. He was a leader, a man of action. And he was a spokesman too. It was Peter who made the confession on behalf of the others when he said to Jesus (Matthew 16:6) *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."* In response to that Jesus had said (Matthew 16:7) *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock (petra) I will build my church..."* Yes Peter had leadership ability. And in addition to that he was also self assured. Peter felt that he would stand for his Lord and never fail him even if all the others did. In Matthew 26:33 Peter says to Jesus *"Even if all fall away because of you, I never will."* Listen to that self confidence. 'I never will'. Jesus in response to that had prophesied that in fact Peter would fail. It would be Peter who would deny Jesus three times. To that Peter had declared *"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."* Peter, the man with qualities as a leader. He has so much zeal and confidence. Willing to act and speak out. And yet, so inadequate as a leader for Christ's church. His confidence was in himself. It was Peter who would do things for his Lord. It was Peter who would never fail. But note this: trusting in yourself is not enough to stand for Jesus. When you trust in yourself you limit your resources to yourself. That's the problem with self confidence. You limit your resources. When a situation gets beyond what you can cope with how do you manage then? Is self enough? If you are self reliant you fail to rely on the awesome resources of Almighty God. Self confidence actually

means you think too small. And the problem also is that when you focus on what you can do you also tend to push your own barrel. You may piously talk of 'doing it all for Jesus'. But often intermingled is pride and a desire for others to notice all you do. Trusting in yourself is not enough to stand for Jesus. Peter certainly found that out. The one who proclaimed *"Lord I will never disown you"*, did, three times. And he left the scene crying as a broken man. Peter had to learn the hard way. There is only one who did not fail. There is only one who could stand against sin and the power of evil. Jesus, who did that in hell itself. It is precisely that which Peter must confess if he is to be a leader in Christ's church. It is in Christ alone that we have salvation. It is by Christ alone that we can help bring hope to our communities. It is by Jesus only that we will see peace come to all creation. All we are and hope for comes by grace.

We see grace in our text as Jesus confronts Peter with love. The reason Jesus confronts him is because he wants Peter to lead the apostles. He wants Peter to be the shepherd of the flock. Peter is gifted but his attitude needs to change. After the night of fishing and breakfast Jesus talks to Peter in front of the others. (John 21:15) *"When they had finished eating Jesus said to Simon Peter 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?'"* Notice how Jesus addresses him as *"Simon, son of John"*. It is not 'Peter, the rock'. Jesus pin points the problem right there. Peter had failed to live up to that name. Jesus faces him with his limitations. Simon on his own would only be Simon. Simon trusting in Jesus is Peter the rock on which Jesus can build his church. The question also gets directly to the issue. *"...do you truly love me more than these?"* That is, do you love me more than these other disciples do? Peter had boasted he would never fail Jesus, even if all the other disciples did, insinuating he loved Jesus more than they did. Yet he had failed worse than the others had. Now the Greek here is very interesting. When Jesus says *"do you truly love me"* the word for 'love' is 'agape'. It is the highest kind of love. It is the noble love of total commitment for another. In a sense Jesus says 'do you really, really, super love me?' In reply Peter says *"Lord you know that I love you"*. The word for 'love' Peter uses is 'phileo' which means 'I have an affection for you'. So in response to Jesus saying 'are you super committed to me' Peter says 'Lord you know I like you a lot'. In other words Peter doesn't dare use the word 'agape', because his life did not match it. In fact his failure towards Jesus was so bad that he relied on Jesus being able to read his

heart to know his love: *"Lord you know"*. 'Look at my heart because my life certainly doesn't back it up'. There is room for a lot of growth in Peter's life. But Jesus accepts Peter: *"Feed my lambs"*. It is not a case of 'Sorry, you aren't good enough. I'll try someone else'. It's a case of 'Peter, if you are humble enough to realise your love is not what it ought to be, that's exactly where I want you to be. Take over the job. Feed my lambs'. Jesus knows that none of us love him in the fullest sense when we begin to serve him. What we need to know is that we love Jesus and we have a long way to grow.

Jesus has not finished yet. He asks Peter a second question. (John 21:16) *"Again Jesus said 'Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?'"* With this second question Jesus probes deeper. He says in effect 'By your answer you realise you don't love me more than the others do. You don't compare so favourably. But what about you yourself. Do you really love me?' Sometimes we think we are doing well for Jesus because we are doing more or better than others. You might be an elder spending hours on Leadership matters or pastoral concerns. You might be teaching God's Own and have to prepare all those lessons. We may not be so sure of our own walk with Jesus. But at least we are busier in the church than a lot of others. But that outward comparison is not the main issue with Jesus. He makes it clear the issue is one of heart to heart. His question is 'Do you personally love me personally. Do you love me with all your heart?' The Greek is again 'agape'. 'Will you give your life for me?' Again all Peter can do is to appeal to Jesus' knowledge of his heart. Again using the word 'phileo' he says *"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you"*. Jesus does, but he wants Peter to admit to it, to truly understand. And Peter understanding Jesus says *"Take care of my sheep"*.

Jesus still has not finished. A third time he asks a question. *"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"* Interestingly this time Jesus does not use the word 'agape' but 'phileo'. Why did Jesus change to 'phileo'? In a sense he is saying 'Peter, twice now you have said you have affection for me. But do you really have any affection for me?' Jesus is putting even Peter's affection for him in doubt. 'Is this so called affection demonstrated by your life, Peter? You denied me three times. So do you have any care at all for me?' Now Peter hits rock bottom. (John 21:17) *"Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time 'Do you love me?'"* Peter is grieving badly. He is stripped of everything. He can do nothing but

plead for mercy. 'Lord you know everything. Despite how everything looks, my boasting, my failure, my denial of you, you know what is in my heart. Lord forgive me. I do wish to serve you with all my heart. Lord, you know that despite it all, I love you'. Jesus does know. So he says *"Feed my sheep"*.

Peter had to learn what we all have to learn. We cannot truly serve Jesus unless we love him. As church Leaders we are not just running a club with a long tradition and certain rules. It is not about just working hard and volunteering and doing committee work. We must have an ever deepening love for Jesus. It is a love that comes from knowing very well our complete unworthiness. Yet also knowing Jesus says 'Your sins are forgiven. Come into my presence and receive my grace'. Those whom Jesus calls to act on his behalf in the church especially have to know this. Those in ministry are to 'feed the lambs', 'feed the sheep'. That means help our children, help our adults and visitors to find Jesus. Help them experience the grace and love of God. As those in ministry we can only do that if we ourselves have experienced the joy of forgiveness. How can we show another person the way of forgiveness if we have not experienced the grace of God ourselves. How can we call on others to love Jesus if we don't love him ourselves. It is our love for Jesus that motivates us to care for his people. It is our love for Jesus that helps us understand how Jesus would care for his own. When we represent Jesus to others we need to be like him in how we speak and act.

For us as church members we must remember we are Jesus 'sheep' we are his 'lambs'. He said to Peter *"Feed my sheep."* It is not our church and we will do as we want. It is Christ's church. Those in Leadership must follow the leading of the Master and work in his strength and follow his Word. And we as a congregation are to accept those in Leadership as servants of Jesus. We are to do so, not because they are always confident and capable. Nor because they will always do the right thing, coming up with all the right decisions. They won't. All those in Leadership or some form of ministry are sinners like the rest of us. And they know it. No we accept them as Christ's gifts to us, because they love Jesus and have experienced his grace. We accept them as Christ's representatives so we all learn humility and how to forgive and be gracious. We accept their ministry because

we love Jesus. Jesus is the hope for our hills communities. And we reveal Jesus through our deep love for him.