November 20, Reign of Christ: Luke 23:33-43

by Scott D. Anderson in the October 25, 2016 issue

In a presidential election year, Reign of Christ Sunday presents a striking contrast. The hubris of U.S. presidents, and of the candidates who aspire to the office, finds no place in the Passion texts that, in two years out of the lectionary's three, serve as the centerpiece on this last Sunday of the church year. At Golgotha, Jesus offers a radically different vision of leadership than what we all too often see in the public realm.

In Luke's version of the story, Jesus is taunted by the soldiers (as agents of the empire) and the Pharisees (as religious leaders). They tell him to exercise the kind of political authority they know best. "Save yourself" is a challenge to act like a secular ruler or religious leader might be expected to act. Even one of the criminals at his side joins the chorus of humiliating invective, hoping against hope that Jesus will exhibit the same kind of power as those who put him on the cross.

Jesus refuses. The only power he exercises in Luke's crucifixion account—forgiving sin and inviting the criminals beside him to embrace the hope of life in God's reign—fully identifies him with the weak, rejected, and humiliated of the world. On the cross, he himself embodies that same weakness, rejection, and humiliation. Power at Golgotha is turned on its ear, finding expression in a confounding act of public vulnerability. If God chooses to be vulnerable in this way to us, how much more so should we humans be vulnerable in owning up to our shortcomings and weaknesses?

Patrick Lencioni, a Roman Catholic who writes books on team management, explains that the most important rule for leadership teams to implement is the necessity of "vulnerability-based trust." He says that good leadership absolutely demands a level of honesty at which weakness and failure can be openly admitted. When that doesn't occur within the dynamics of team leadership, this communicates that the work environment is an unsafe place for one's humanity to be fully expressed. This in turn creates an atmosphere in which leadership can easily fail.

How? Lencioni points out that leaders who are unwilling to admit weaknesses or blind spots have difficulty changing direction when circumstances warrant it. More importantly, people cannot really trust them—because they cannot be trusted to tell the truth. The result, he says, is that all significant decisions are ultimately measured against the ego or image of a leader or group of leaders, rather than by some more objective measure.

This year on the campaign trail, we have seen hubris displayed in spades. But presidential hubris is of course nothing new. Lyndon Johnson always seemed to get his way—by doing whatever it took. He entered politics through the expediency of buying votes, and he remained in politics via “the Johnson treatment”: an extraordinary mix of charm, craftiness, and cruelty. Johnson’s brashness and legislative logrolling led to enormous success on the domestic front but cataclysmic failure in Vietnam. In the end, Lyndon Johnson was compelled to fall on his political sword and decline to seek reelection.

Richard Nixon rose from the political ashes to win the White House in 1968 by vowing that he had a “secret plan” to end the war in Vietnam. Instead, his secret plan was a scheme to undermine the rights of U.S. citizens. When the Watergate burglars were finally caught, the truth about years of presidential excess gradually began to be revealed—until Nixon, faced with certain impeachment and criminal charges, resigned. British interviewer David Frost, in trying to pin Nixon down on how he justified the illegalities he had resorted to, received a response that speaks volumes about presidential hubris: “Well, when the president does it, that means it is not illegal.”

The exercise of leadership rooted in vulnerability is absolutely critical in church life as well. Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King in 1925, fearful of the rise of secular authority and the increasing denial of Christ as king in the public realm. The rise of non-Christian dictatorships in Europe, some of which threatened the authority of the church, led the pope to institutionalize this annual liturgical focus on the rule of Christ as a counterbalance.

Unfortunately, Pius XI had the tendency to conflate church authority with its secular counterpart. What he overlooked was the kind of authority Christ wielded, the power in vulnerability so evident on the cross. At Golgotha, Jesus is not advocating the replacement of one form of political power with another. He is advocating an entirely different way of being in relationship with one another in the realm of God, where

power is expressed in public acts of costly vulnerability.

Luke’s text for Reign of Christ Sunday thus also serves as a searing critique of the church and its leadership in the ways power is exercised. Any denominational leader who cannot publicly admit failure, uncertainty, or weakness creates an atmosphere of institutional distrust. Any competent pastor who cannot be vulnerable enough to admit their humanity when they make mistakes cannot expect a congregation to trust them, much less follow their leadership.

On the cross, Jesus is the fullest human expression of God’s vulnerability, the one who embraces our humanity in all of its limitation and humiliation. It is the public embrace of our own humanity, not some hubristic self-image, that should shape every leader, from presidents to pastors. When that happens, the reign of Christ moves off the pages of the liturgical calendar and into the lifeblood of our world.