

**Proper 12, Pentecost VIII**  
**July 26, 2009**

I've been involved in our Diocese's current Deacon Formation program since its beginning in the early 90's, and there are a few things I've learned from that. One of them has become sort of a slogan for the program, and the folks hear it over and over. It's simple. It says "It's not about you." I have suggested tattoos. (Tom may remember this.)

The point is clear enough. Ministry, and especially leadership in ministry, is not primarily about the minister (except in a backhanded way I'll talk about some other time.) Instead, ministry is about service—service to the community, and service to God. That's part of the larger point I try to make to the students that ministry, and preparation for and Ordination to ministry, is not therapeutic; it will not fix what ails you or remove distressing tendencies. When applicants for ordination take that seriously, it culls the herd nicely.

Obviously, King David was not in one of my Deacon Formation Classes—and neither was the crowd on the mountain with Jesus we just heard about from John's Gospel. (Parenthetically, all of these wonderful episodes in today's Gospel are central to the whole of Chapter 6, which we'll be hearing for the next few weeks; so it might be a good idea to take it home and look at it from time to time.) Anyway, I'll start with David, but focus on the Gospel.

In the story of Uriah and Bathsheba we get David at his autocratic worst; and we get to watch power corrupt. David did it because he wanted to and because he *could*. And he got caught. Sound familiar? Yeah. Unlike exiling lepers and sacrificing goats, this is one thing that just hasn't gotten any better since David's time. (I'm not sure it's gotten any worse—but communications have gotten a lot better; and this is certainly ever before us these days.)

Now, generally, the question a preacher asks about now is “What’s wrong with these guys?” It’s a good question. What is it about leaders, especially charismatic and influential leaders, that seems so often to lead to such evil? Maybe everybody does it, but that won’t work because not everybody can. Whether it’s killing off an inconvenient husband or taking a free trip to Argentina, you can’t turn to either the Bible or the newspaper without running headlong into this stuff. What to do about it is a good question, and we’ll hear Nathan give a pretty good answer to that next Sunday.

But there is another question that goes with it. The flip side is of all of this is that *we*, by our structures, or by our expectations, or by our inattention, or by our cynicism or by something else or by all of the above—*we* seem to do something to and with our leaders—or we fail to do something—that somehow far too often leads to the violation of those very values which the leaders themselves most passionately profess. As usual, I’m better at questions here than I am at answers; but I do wonder if there are ways that we can help our leaders—perhaps before things get to David and Uriah’s situation—to hold fast to what they, and we, proclaim; ways to help communicate with clarity how public service, no less than ministry, is not about them—their perks or their power or their status. As always, if things are to change—it will be about us as much as about them.

Oddly, something similar is going on in the Gospel. Jesus is in Galilee, and he’s on a roll. He’s been healing sick folks right and left, and he just got through feeding a ton of people with a half pound of food. What happened next should come as no surprise. They knew a good deal when they saw it. So, somebody started a “Draft Jesus for King” movement, and the next thing you know the recruitment committee was being formed (and armed).

Now, when Jesus realized what was going on, he had a choice to make. After all, this was not the lynch mob that came later. These were fans. They saw what Jesus did and they liked what they saw. Bread and healing—what could be better? (Really, what?) That crowd probably wanted to form some kind of “Jesus of Nazareth Healing and Feeding Society.” And as king Jesus would have it made. The pay and benefits would be excellent, the hours negotiable, housing would doubtless be provided and his personal taxes could be deferred indefinitely.

There was no doubt that Jesus would make them a swell king. Both the tourist trade and the feeding and healing operation would be good for everybody—the tax base would grow wonderfully; business would improve and the citizens would have their own miracle worker around the next time *they* got hungry or sick. It was a good deal for everybody. (Think about it—it really *was* a good deal.)

Now, one of the ways we deny Jesus’ humanity—and in doing that remove his life from our lives—is by pretending that all of Jesus’ decisions were easy and automatic—that he was following a set script. He wasn’t. It didn’t work that way. Jesus knew that the “recruitment committee” was offering him security, safety, prosperity, and respect. These are things we all want, things everyone wants. They are also things that Jesus knew he would never have if he turned them down. If he became their little king, he wouldn’t have to be poor, his family wouldn’t think he was crazy, he could have a normal life, he wouldn’t have to be cold, hungry, or afraid for his life. In fact, his life would be easier and better in every way *we* consider important—in every way we want for our children. As an extra bonus, the people would get what they wanted—what they thought was most important.

As we all know, Jesus would not have been the first to trade challenge for security; to exchange the possibility of greatness for the assurance of competence; to swap the call of God for the rewards that come from giving the crowds what they want. Not by a long shot. No, Jesus' decision could not have come easily. He had to decide which to follow: the voices everyone could hear rolling up the hillside chanting, "We want Jesus" or the other, quieter voice that said, "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased." He had to choose.

And in rejecting their offer, Jesus is saying something about himself, and something about us. First, he is deciding that his vocation, his mission, is not about him. It's not about making it, or about grabbing whatever gold ring is out there at the moment. His mission is about faithful obedience to the Father—even if that gets in the way of what everybody knows is success. That's tough. It was tough for him, and it's tough for us. (And, no, he didn't have any extra help we don't have.) The call to serve was not to serve himself, but to reach beyond himself, no matter how costly.

And one thing that Jesus' rejection of kingship says about us is that we don't know what we want. No, that's not exactly right. We know what we want all right—God knows I do. But in refusing to be a bread and healing king, Jesus is saying, among other things, that what we *need* is deeper than what we want, and that what he brings can, if we let it, satisfy even our deepest need.

Bread and healing are fine—especially if you're hungry or sick. In fact, what could be better? What could be better? Well, imagining that there is an answer to that question, and chasing after that answer, come what may, this is the core of life with God, this is the great mystery of human life, and this is the beginning of what matters the most.