

Reading the news, it's pretty clear that society is still rather enamored with the idea of a strong leader. A big boss, a powerful person, who by the might of their power, wit, and intelligence will take this broken world we live in and whip it into shape. We want a leader we can admire, be proud of, feel safe following, a leader that cares about us and the planet. As hostile forces seem to make gains in power and wealth, our societal instinct is to call for a strong and powerful leader who'll finally reign in the chaos and bring us to a time of abundance and safety.

And this is no new thing.

About a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, the people of our Biblical texts, who lived around the Mediterranean and Middle East, were caught in between powerful Empires and Kingdoms. As these powers rose up around them, the ancient Israelites demanded a King. God was quick to let them know this was a terrible idea, that worldly Kings always serve only their own interests, they drag their people into wars, they extract labor and wealth, they decimate families and steal ancestral lands ... a King would be a very bad idea indeed. But the people insisted: they demanded a king so they could be just like the nations around them, so that they too could have a strong and powerful leader, to keep them safe and fight their battles for them.<sup>1</sup>

We've inherited a similar longing. Not now for a King, but still for a strong leader who's kinda like the other leaders, only better.

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase of 1 Samuel 8:11-21

As we take the long view of human history, it certainly does seem like the ‘the natural way’ for nations or societies to be held together is by strong and powerful leadership, and ‘the obvious way’ for strong leadership to be effective is to assert power to maintain control.

But there are many things, once thought to be natural or obvious, that have since been shown to be nothing more than our own flawed human perception and interpretation:

The universe, for example, does not, in fact, revolve around the earth, although that was thought to be abundantly clear to generations of star-gazers before Copernicus;

We’ve also learned that space and time are not absolute, or fixed, as was once considered entirely self-evident before Einstein;

And today, long held ideas about the nature of reality are being challenged by those studying at the quantum level, their discoveries are far from obvious or intuitive to those of us observing the world at this scale.<sup>2</sup>

Science has long been good at reminding us to hold lightly even our most enduring and persistent assumptions, and to be ready and willing to have our thinking challenged and disrupted to make way for something new.

All through our Gospel texts, Jesus is doing much the same thing: encouraging us to hold lightly even our most enduring assumptions, and challenging and disrupting our thinking, about the world around us, the people we share it with, and the future that’s possible. Jesus disrupts our thinking about

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<sup>2</sup> For a fascinating (and disrupting!) read in this area of study see, Carlo Rovelli: *The Order of Time* (Riverhead Books, New York: 2018)

power, and about leadership, offering us new and alternative ways to think about life.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus engages with James and John and their expectation that his leadership will be like the controlling power and status they're used to, only better. It's still the only model of leadership most of us can imagine, and it was certainly the one James and John were both thinking of when they asked Jesus if they might play a role in his new regime.

In his response, Jesus calls for a shift in perspective. Don't look to the past, to habit, or to long held ideas that have been passed down, don't look to the world, there's nothing there but more of the same. Instead – think differently, look within, come right up close to your own self, think about your relationships with each other, the ways you are with each other, and see here a new form of power that will begin to emerge.

We might still think we need a powerful leader who will save us, fight our battles for us, transform this world for us, make it all better *for us*; but Jesus is saying we're asking for the wrong thing. The transformation of this world, its healing and its liberation can only arise from within and through relationship. It cannot be done for us, we must do it, we must co-create the world we want by paying attention to the way we live.

Today it's super-easy to hold a high-level, zoomed out, macro perspective of the way the world works. But the view we have from way out here is inaccurate, it's so zoomed out it can only ever offer us an impression of what we are as

human beings, an impression of how it is we function together.

And our impression is an interpretation of the world, largely based on inherited ideas, habits of thinking, and shared cultural assumptions, and this doesn't make it very accurate. Surely, we shouldn't place our whole trust in what we think we know from this great distance.

Jesus calls us to pay attention instead to our own direct and lived experience. To close the distance between us and the world, let go of the impression the world makes on us and actually experience the truth of life in the relationships we have with one another. This change of scale, this shift of perspective is church, it's parish life. It's here that we can perceive directly and more accurately what it is to be human, because this is our actual lived experience as it's bound to and arising from our chosen life faith. It's here we can learn to trust the power of service and mutual care on a human life.

Parish life gathers us so that we might be transformed - at the level of heart and mind and action. And so it's essential this be a place where we're encouraged to learn about and practice being our fullest selves, disrupting our habits of thinking, and our assumptions, and embracing possible new ways of perceiving and relating and connecting to one another.

Down at the level of lived experience, we know we neither want nor need a strong and mighty leader to do it all for us, make it all happen for us, because at the level of our own relationships we have agency, and we can cultivate

confidence in our ability to co-create the fair and loving, safe and supportive community we want to be a part of.

Jesus teaches us how to live at the level of our relationship to one another, encouraging us to pay close attention to the ways we care for one another and generously share life together – in times of joy and *especially* when there's conflict; when things are stable and going well and *especially* when they're disrupted or challenging; during times of comfort and safety and *especially* when we're stressed or feeling fearful.

If we want the world to be transformed, we've gotta be willing to be transformed. If we long for things to be different out there, we've got to figure out how to co-create the community we long to be part of in here. The strong, brilliant leader we want came, and lived among us - Jesus gave his own life so that ours might be transformed, and ultimately the world along them. We now, collectively, make up Christ's body - how will we build something here, on this small scale, by our relationships and through our trust in that mighty and transformative power that emanates from the truth of God through our relationships, and that offers us an entirely new impression of the world at large and fills us with a far more accurate hope of what's possible for a better future.