**Sermon January 15, 2017**

After I had finished at University in Boston in the late 1960s, I went to work for the world’s 4th largest company, General Electric. It had 485,000 employees at the time. There I became very interested in leadership for two reasons: they wanted me to become interested and secondly I had had a bit of a revelation. It was a much more friendly, community oriented experience than I had imagined. They seemed genuinely interested in me and my family and also in their various stakeholders. They seriously wanted me to be happy in my job and feel like an important part of the organisation, and therefore feel successful and rewarded. Of course I was expected to show the same sort of concerns within my workplace. And that, it turned out was company-wide as far as I could tell. Much more so than I recalled at school or University and in my holiday jobs which were awfully impersonal. It felt a bit more like my church youth group in Takapuna which, by the way, continues to meet – most recently in early December where we confirmed and supported each other once again. How can it be that such a large organisation could feel much more friendly than say Takapuna Grammar School with 1200 students and less than 80 staff I kept wondering? The nature of leadership and creating a supportive environment was a hot topic at the time in the late 60s early 70s, at the height of the Vietnam War. I wanted to learn more.

At our church for example, among the younger parents we set up a programme of so-called sensitivity training led by a couple of young former nuns and a HR specialist who worked in leadership training for one of the local corporations TRW, which made among other things torpedoes and similar weapons like missiles. This sensitivity training was quite controversial at the time but in its more moderate form, it was about listening and trusting others, accepting differing perspectives and melding them together to achieve mutually agreed goals for the wider group and outsiders too. One of our goals was to get at least a couple of us onto the church session and try to steer the congregation away from blind uncritical support of the American position on the war. It worked but not before a good bit of controversy but that’s for another forum. It did bring a wildly diverse group of young married folk together under the church’s banner to accomplish certain things. As individuals we couldn’t have done it.

In the corporate leadership front there are always fashions. At that time a very common term in the academic and corporate world was servant leadership. As we have read this morning, the concept isn’t new – it goes right back to at least the 6th century BC. I guess at the time of the mid – 60s, this concept was being developed by another of the world’s top 4 companies AT&T, best known then as Ma Bell. The servant leadership concept was spearheaded there by one Robert K Greenleaf, who when AT & T was finally broken up by Congress, went on to write at length and set up a foundation dedicated to servant leadership. And it still exists. The use of this term was fascinating for me as it seemed to have a connection with my Christian faith which I felt I knew something about. But it raised the question “Can the model of servant hood as lived by Jesus Christ and raised in the course of today’s two Bible readings actually work in practice?” Like in business, in the church, in other organisations, in government and in neighbourhoods for example?

I went on to take MBA degree courses at Case Western Reserve University and this servant leadership term kept cropping up again and again. What was behind it? Pretty simple really. Robert Greeleaf said that “The first and most important choice people make is the choice to serve, without which one’s capacity to lead or make a positive difference is severely limited.” There are many observations on servant leadership in print. Organisations themselves must serve the wider world too, not just their employees. So corporately they are servants in a sense. The characteristics of a servant leader both individual and communal, include the notion that service to others comes first in all things. That is the main objective. Servant leaders acknowledge others’ perspectives first, they involve them in decisions and build up a sense of community. It’s a way of behaving towards and with others. Such leaders demonstrate humility and focus on others’ needs. Servant leadership includes listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion rather than direction, conceptualisation and dreaming with others and a consideration of how their actions may affect others. Self and dollars are of secondary or tertiary importance here.

Does it work? Well that, to the best of my ability, has been my preferred style whether as manager, landlord or friend, consultant or Board member. In many situations I have introduced change. Sometimes big changes. A servant leadership approach is transformational. If those in charge are there to serve others, the hiearchal model gets turned upside down. You know, the idea of the triangular schema with the CEO or director at the top overseeing the senior managers and then a larger number of middle and lower managers and finally the so-called workers at the lowest level. A servant- leadership model sees the whole thing turned upside down. The Board is there to serve the CEO and support management to succeed with the managers there to serve their co-workers and assist them succeed. The most important group in the organisation are those who deliver the services externally. Like the receptionist. There’s no doubt that such models bring about a change in attitudes and allow groups and organisations to bring about change for the betterment of their own organisation and the world. A servant leadership approach is capable of effective transformation. I’ve tried it and succeeded and seen others do it too, and it works. Of course there are times when it is hard to achieve the ideal outcomes and some folks are hurt or external forces confound the strategy. But I am convinced a servant leadership style is the best approach for me.

The two passages of Isaiah we read today are poems which are known as two of the four Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah. We covered the background last week but for those who missed it, Isaiah addresses the dejected exiles from destroyed Jerusalem who had been in Babylonian captivity for around 45 years. They yearned for freedom and a return to Jerusalem. They were looking for a leader who would victoriously overthrow the Babylonians and lead the Israelites back to their promised land and allow them to rebuild the Temple which had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. In the two readings, Isaiah reports that God is sending them instead, a servant to lead them and he describes the style of this leader. The Gospel writers over 600 years later point to these readings as prophesying the birth of Jesus and they have good grounds for that. However there continues to be speculation about who the servant really is that Isaiah refers to. In the second reading, actually set down for today, Isaiah clearly defines the servant in one verse as Israel. As with most poetry you can read it more than one way.

Let’s take a quick look at the servant as defined in the Isaiah chapter. God claims the servant as chosen by himself even in the womb, and prepares him/Israel/or whomever to serve God’s purposes. I like the bit about God preparing a polished arrow and concealing it in God’s quiver ready for the right moment. God calls unlikely servants and perhaps more importantly, often those servants do not recognise themselves as such – like you and me. God keeps us in his quiver until he is ready to use us. God is preparing for the day He will be glorified and the servant is enveloped by the inescapable presence of God. The servant laments that his efforts have already been futile, and he experiences utter weariness from labouring on God’s behalf in the world. We can empathise with that can’t we. Overwhelmed by violence of all kinds –inter-communal in wars and personal violence in the case of abuse – economic repression, ecological devastation , we too experience the servant’s grief. We are tired of it and seem helpless. But Isaiah’s servant finds something to which he still holds – his cause is with the Lord. God’s strength conveys fresh vitality continuously. And then God springs another of his continuous surprises. A transformational one which perhaps a servant is best equipped to bring about – not just the restoration of Israel but the whole world. Their own self-serving goal is not at all sufficient. That’s just one small task says God through the prophet. Really? The servant’s role is to be a light unto all the nations. God’s claim is that Israel looks beyond its immediate community and its own release, to release and restore the whole world. And going back to last week’s reading, this is a servant who will not break a bruised reed and will not snuff out a dim wick. A gentle and encouraging character. Someone who supports the weak the sick and the poor and those being treated unjustly. The servant is someone who will be despised and abhorred by the very nations to which he goes as God’s light. Someone who will suffer the pain of servanthood. The servant will startle the powerful from their thrones into postures of worship and respect. In the end the servant’s vindication is ensured not by human agency as potent and faithful as this may be, but by God’s character.

These words are in the form of poetry or picture language for us. They tell of transformation and God’s faithfulness. Yes, the prophesy of Jesus coming fits in well and yes, we can see the parallels with the suffering which Jesus went through and it is right that we celebrate servanthood at this time immediately after Christmas or as part of Advent. And the poetry may refer to Israel as the servant and such servanthood may yet to be achieved by Israel. It doesn’t seem to be behaving right now as the servant song portrays. But for us, Jesus is the reference and model of servanthood, and Jesus calls us to serve God through service to others. That brings us into the picture both as individuals, the church and the wider community. Let’s take the last of these first.

When the first Education Act was passed in New Zealand in the mid-19th century, the purpose of education according to the Act, was so that everyone could play a role in participating in the community and serving it. In other words, the purpose was to serve others or servanthood. Sounds like the role of education for Scotland defined by one of the Presbyterian Church founders, John Knox in the 16th century. As Alan Burton a member of Somervell and leading educationist has pointed out the Presbyterian Scots were very focussed as immigrants in NZ on getting good education systems in place so they would have been the obvious ones to influence or even write the original Act. After all they built the first University and first school system in New Zealand. Ever wondered why the graduation marches of all universities in New Zealand are led by bagpipes and drums?? In the mid-20th century the purpose of education in the Act was changed. The purpose of education is now for every student to reach his or her potential. This was a very big change in focus from others to self. We may be reaping the disadvantage of this change.

Martin Luther King Jr, a favourite of mine – we both graduated from the same Boston University but he was a few years ahead of me said “ Life’s most urgent question is what are you doing for others?”

He also went on to say “Not everybody can be famous but everybody can be great because greatness is determined by service. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve, you don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato or Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second law of thermodynamics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love.”

If Isaiah’s readings today strike a chord with you either through its inference to the coming of Jesus or simply through the poetry, you too, can serve as Isaiah’s servant. And in this way you will be part of God’s quiver ready for action when he calls. And in my experience, God calls often. In surprising situations and ways. You don’t always know at the time he is calling you but looking back, you can see God’s hand in what has happened and what you can be part of. The late Harold Turner, who used to be a member of Somervell, was possibly the most highly regarded theologian NZ has produced. He was involved in a remarkable number of unusual situations and ws closely involved with some remarkable people. In his autobiographical book The Laughter in Paradise – he notes that looking back on events in his life he could see God’s hand in them and his contribution usually but only after the events, and if he listened carefully, he was certain he could hear the laughter of God at Harold’s reaction to the springing the unexpected opportunities on Harold. No, we don’t have to be managers of an enterprise to be servants or to be a theologian either. We can all be servants, just to see our neighbours in a different way, the homeless, the poor, the abused, the victims of war and immigrants, our best friends and all those with whom we come in contact, the shop assistants, the bureaucrats, the bank clerk over the phone when our internet banking goes wrong, the lawnmowing man, the office staff and so it can go on.

The servant leadership concept drawn from corporate management theory and practice is not the final answer I believe, but it may well be part of the answer and for me it has been useful and effective. It can be transformational in its effect on how people react to each other and achieve their goals and those of the organisation when done well.

You will be aware that four members of Somervell are on the Saint Kentigern Trust Board, NZ’s largest independent school system. Our definition of education in our Trust Deed is for the purpose of glorifying God and providing service to others. We try hard in that context to get across the idea that service to others doesn’t end when the World Vision 40 hour Famine is just over, or that glorifying God begins Wednesdays at noon and concludes at 12.30pm when the weekly chapel service gets out. The idea of servanthood doesn’t just apply for tricky situations but is a paradigm of thinking which affects relationships with all stakeholders and it is 24/7. Teachers are there to serve the students, teachers are there to serve each other, and teachers are there to serve parents as well. HODs are there to serve teachers students, and other HoDs and the head is there to serve his or her staff and ensure they have the right resources to do their jobs, not just do what the Board instructs them to do. Likewise the Board is there to serve the parents, the students, the teachers and the head, the providers of services and so on. So it goes on.

And it’s even more than true for those who take on the role of servant of Christ in whatever we do. In this ever more secular world, we find ourselves being taken into in a strange land. And to use a phrase from the song Rivers of Babylon by Boney M “How do we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

It can be painful work and it can be tiring work, being a servant. But we know if we are servants, we are doing God’s work and in this case we will find the strength to carry on. No matter our situation. A bruised reed he will not break, a dim wick he will not snuff out. God’s kingdom has an important place for everyone.

Amen.