

Collins Street Baptist Church
November 21, 2010
10.30am

A Leader Worth Following
Jeremiah 23.1-6

Six days from now we elect our leaders. On November 27 we choose those to lead our State Government for the next four years. Will it be the incumbent John Brumby and the Labour party, or will it be Ted Baillieu's turn with his Liberal/National coalition? And what of the minor parties like the Greens? The election of government is all about leadership and in whom we invest the right to lead.

In preparation for the State election, we have given three Sundays to consulting the prophets of the Old Testament, guided by this question: what difference does faith make to the way we vote? Drawing on the lectionary readings for these three weeks, we have so far listened to the words of Haggai and Isaiah. Today it's Jeremiah. You may remember the previous words of Haggai and Isaiah were spoken to the people of Judah upon their return to Jerusalem in 520BC (there a timeline in the bulletin if it's helpful). They had been exiled in Babylon for more than 60 years. They returned to a city destroyed, a temple in ruins, and a land gripped by drought and famine. The words of Haggai and Isaiah were designed to lift their spirits, to cast a new vision for their future and to remind them of their identity as the people of God.

By contrast, the words of Jeremiah 23 are spoken some 65 years earlier. The people of Judah have only just arrived in Babylon. They are absolutely broken, their wounds still bleeding, their hearts grieving the enormous loss of loved ones, homeland and nationhood. The Babylonians had destroyed everything these people had ever known—their children slaughtered, their spouses raped, their holy places defiled, and their beloved Jerusalem raised to the ground. Here they are in Babylon, a people without home or hope.

Jeremiah, now in the final years of his life, writes the words we've just read. His purpose is two fold: firstly he speaks judgement upon the leaders who allowed this tragedy to unfold; secondly he speaks encouragement to his beloved people. The truth is, Jeremiah had spent much of his earlier ministry as a prophet, 37 years of it, repeatedly warning the kings and leaders of Judah that this calamity was coming, but they consistently ignored him. In fact they publically ridiculed him, rebuked him, arrested him; they even sought to have him executed for treason. They worked hard to silence him but Jeremiah would not go quietly; the words burned within his bones, driven by obedience to God and love for his people. Ultimately though, it was to no avail. The leaders would not lead and the nation collapsed under the weight of their self-centred arrogance, pride and stupidity.

Leadership: who wants it? The business of leadership in any context, political or otherwise, has to be one of the most demanding vocations you can imagine. Yet the line of aspirants never diminishes. The lure of leadership has a unique capacity to compel the best and the worst in us, and both in equal measure. It is a potent brew. Leadership offers power, influence, the chance to make a difference, the chance to make a name. It offers a platform, recognition, fame and sometimes fortune. A critical question for us to consider next Saturday is this: what makes a leader one worth following? What should we be looking for in those who aspire to public office? And what is our responsibility once these people are elected? To address these questions, I want to take you verse by verse through this text. I encourage you to have it in front of you. My sense is there is wisdom here worth hearing and we do well to listen.

The text begins with Jer 23.1 *'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!'* For Jeremiah, this is a clear reference to the leaders of Judean society who, by their neglect and self-interest, were responsible for the deportation of the people to Babylon. These leaders failed in their primary responsibility to protect the people. It's a damning critique of those at the highest level of society whose

irresponsible maltreatment of the lower classes, 'the sheep of my pasture,' led directly to this tragedy.

What is telling is the use of the shepherd imagery to describe the nature of political leadership. While in the New Testament we get accustomed to thinking of church leaders as shepherds, the image has strong political links all through the Old Testament. Another prophet working at the same time as Jeremiah is Ezekiel. Ezekiel is speaking to the leaders of the northern kingdom at the same time Jeremiah is warning those in the south. Interestingly, Ezekiel uses the very same imagery in Ezekiel 34 as Jeremiah uses here (there is part of that chapter printed in your bulletin just below the reading from Jeremiah). Rather than feeding the sheep, these political leaders had fed only themselves, gathering the fat and the wool for their own use. Rather than serving the people, they used the people. Ezekiel says in verse 4, *'You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.'* This list of failures is significant because it details, by contrast, the purpose of government in God's eyes and it speaks judgement on those who aspire to lead but fail to shepherd the people under their care. Today's political leaders are many things, the demands upon them extraordinary: they are managers, governors, statesmen, negotiators, lawmakers, boundary keepers, heads of State and bureaucrats. But rarely do we hear today's leaders described as shepherds, tending to and caring for those whose welfare has been entrusted to them. According to Jeremiah, this is leadership at its very heart.

Jer 23.2 *'It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you ...'* These are pointed, fearful and sobering words. Political leadership comes with significant power and opportunity, but also great responsibility. *'To whom much is given much is expected,'* Jesus said. Our State and Federal leaders are held to account for their leadership, for the quality of their shepherding. In the most immediate terms this happens naturally through our process of democracy. Fail to serve the needs of the people and you may well

find yourself out of office at the next election. But there is more to this here. Political leaders are accountable to God. Whatever their religious nor non-religious stripe, there is a day of reckoning, a point of ultimate accountability, for every power is subject to the power of God. Indeed, the shepherd is invested with power, but that power has a very specific purpose. Misuse it, and God will act: *'So I will attend to you!'*

Jer 23.3 *'Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them.'* What is pertinent here is the responsibility that God takes for this failure of leadership. It was God's appointed ones who led the people into this calamity so it will be God who steps in and restores: *'I will bring them back to their fold and they shall be fruitful and multiply.'* Here in this simple statement God exemplifies one of the fundamentals of good leadership. The buck stops with God: *'I was at the helm when this tragedy befell you, and I will take full responsibility for putting it right. I will ensure that the people are led back to a place of security and prosperity.'* There is no blame shifting with God. There is no face saving. Real leadership names responsibility and embraces it without reserve. How difficult this is for leaders to do. Whatever we make of Kevin Rudd's brief stay in the prime minister's office, I will never forget the day he stood in the parliament and, before the nation, said to the indigenous people of this land, 'We are sorry!' In that moment we saw a glimpse of leadership that we had not seen for a long time.

Jer 23.4 *'I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed ...'* God's promise here is to appoint new leadership, leadership that will inspire the confidence of the people and lead them back into security and prosperity. Of course, this is no lifetime guarantee of success. In fact, the story of the Old Testament is God's appointment of so many people to positions of leadership, and almost every one of them failed at some level, some in small ways and other in spectacular style. Yet God never stopped raising up new leaders, persisting, renewing, reinvesting over and over again. This is not our first election and neither will be it be our last, but in every appointment made, God's hand is at

work in some mysterious way. If God keeps engaging, then who are we to walk away as though it doesn't matter? It does.

Jer 23.5 *'The days are surely coming when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.'* Though we go immediately to the person of Jesus, this was not the most immediate connection for Jeremiah's audience. It speaks of shepherds yet to be appointed over the people of Judah, leaders who will lead wisely according to the most fundamental marks of good leadership: justice and righteousness. It was these two things that were most blatantly absent in the leadership of King Zedekiah and his cronies when the people of Judah were so humiliatingly defeated by the Babylonians. Still today it is the twin commitments to righteousness and justice that remain the trademarks of leadership in the republic of God. Jer 23.6 *'In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'* Interestingly, King Zedekiah's name meant 'the Lord is my righteousness.' Yet in every possible way Zedekiah failed to live up to his calling and God's judgement upon him was severe.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. In the person of Christ we are reminded of the benchmarks of great leadership: a shepherd willing to lay his life down for those entrusted to his care; a leader who takes full responsibility for the failings and the welfare of his people, even to the point of death; a leader whose every act and every word is guided by the righteousness and justice of God.

As we prepare to cast our vote next weekend, there are two things I encourage you to do. *Firstly*, look discerningly for evidence of these commitments to righteousness and justice in those you vote for. You'll never find them fully formed. Every leader and every person who aspires to lead has feet of clay, yet God is always on the lookout for glimmers of truth, for the seeds of commitment to righteousness and justice, sometimes in the most unlikely places. Our task is to do likewise. *Secondly*, our responsibility is to pray for those we elect to office. It is all too easy to show up

on polling day and then settle back for the next four years in our own cynicism, sniffing our noses at the apparent failings of those we elected. Frankly, it is so much harder to remain engaged as people of faith, praying consistently and intelligently for those who lead. Yet this is what we are called to do. Indeed this is what are obligated to do as the people of God. Leadership is a fearful thing; the responsibilities staggering and the accountability before the people and before God extraordinary. These leaders deserve our prayers. May we be found faithful in our responsibility. Amen.