

Learning to Be Great by Serving

Political Science courses in universities around the world laud the wisdom of a certain Italian man whose philosophies about leadership are entrenched in Western thought. In my first year at university I was encouraged to emulate him, to become a disciple. Those who did so were bound to discover how to be truly great in the eyes of other people.

The master manipulator of people

Nicolo Machiavelli, the gentleman in question, was born in Florence in 1469 and died in 1527. He is best known for his short work, "The Prince", in which he gave advice to the Medici rulers, regarding the way to obtain and use power. Machiavellism has become synonymous with treachery, manipulation and dictatorial rule. It has been said that the term "Old Nick", used in English to refer to the Devil, was derived from Nicolo. According to Machiavelli, the interests of a ruler are above all individual virtues and morality. If a Prince (or anyone in authority, for that matter) wishes to prevail against others, he must use artifices of deceit and trickery against them. He should try to win the affection of his subjects by pretending to be virtuous and to care for their needs. He should feign interest in religion, because of the capacity of the church to keep people submissive, obedient and relatively content. In fact, Machiavelli opposed Christianity, because Jesus exalted humility, meekness, love, forgiveness and patience. According to Nicolo, Christian virtues weaken the social and patriotic instincts of man and the capacity of rulers to manipulate their baser instincts. He taught that the end justifies the means. The effective ruler is permitted to be morally corrupt, if this preserves his power base.

For centuries, leaders, policy makers and speech writers have taken their cues from Machiavelli. Many rulers, not only political ones, operate on the basis that the key to greatness and power is to dominate and use others. But don't blame Machiavelli. In a sense, all he did was manipulate the interests of those who sought power (how ironic that the rulers of his day rejected his advice, which has been followed ever since by others).

The world's view of greatness

Greatness, in the world, is measured by the size of one's kingdom. We talk about people in position "empire building", adding to their power bases by manipulating and maximising circumstances to secure and further their influence. Listen to members of Parliament using every opportunity, every media sound bite, and every speech to score points. (Don't let the facts get in the way of a good story, especially if it involves denigrating your opponent.) Over the years I have been in and out of hundreds of meetings where the combined egos of those present was figuratively enough to power the lighting of a small town. Everybody wants to be "top dog". From time to time "power dressing" comes back into vogue. We want to look better, sound better, argue better, and accumulate influence and obligation better than anyone else. We take the same attitudes

into marriage and family relationships. Listen to the stereotypes. "I'll show him who's the boss". "Who does she think she is talking to?" "I wear the pants around here. I am the head of my home". "You may be the head, but I am the neck and I turn the head". It is easy to confuse power with authority, management with true leadership. It is, perhaps, natural to confuse a man and the office he occupies. If I talk about discussions with the likes of Henry Kissinger and Prince Charles, people listen to me. That is the way of the world, and we shouldn't be surprised.

Jesus and greatness

Jesus always measured greatness by the yardstick of service. "Whoever wants to be great must become a servant" (Mark 10:43). The Christian approach to obtaining, keeping and using power is different from the ways of the world. But first Jesus had to deal with wrong attitudes in his own band of followers. The disciples were not above being competitive and grasping. Consider, for example, the account of the two sons of Zebedee (Matthew 20:20-28).

Toward the end of his ministry, when they had been with Jesus long enough to know better, Zebedee's boys came to Jesus with their mother, seeking a favour. She opened negotiations by "worshipping him". Now, that's manipulative. Praising people as a means to getting on their good side as a precursor to asking for something is not new. What she wanted was for her two young men to flank Jesus when he came into power. This way, both she and they would be highly influential and share his throne and honour. It sounded better than returning to the fishing business of their father. That was too "common". The prospect of ruling with Jesus promised status. The other disciples were, naturally, highly offended. Jesus knew they were not above such an approach (perhaps they were put out only because the young men got there first), so it fell to him to teach them the principles of servanthood.

Jesus had a particular view about greatness. The princes of the Gentiles, he explained, had great power and authority and those who were able to do so used their positions to dominate entire communities. His own country was subservient to a cruel Roman administration. When the Governor walked through the town people bowed; they put their faces near the ground while they spat at his name. It was customary to call out "Hail Benefactor". The common people hated it. That's why they rebelled. Like most people, they found subservience hard to swallow. Resentment affected their entire lives. Some of them adjusted though, and took advantage of the afterglow of power. The priests (especially the politically astute Sadducees) became the party bosses over the ordinary people and held them in check, for their own advantage. The tax collectors made deals with the Roman overlords and made fortunes and influence from exploiting the powerless. There was a definite pecking order. Others were just like puppets on strings, unable to control their destinies. At the bottom of the pile were the poor, women, sick, children and the oppressed. Luke stresses the love Jesus had for these people. One day he surprised them by taking a small child out of the crowd and saying that he (or she) was higher than the greatest prophet in Israel.

In Jesus' lexicon, greatness came from service. Not from being servile, crawling, sycophantic, selling out integrity and honour to maximise opportunities for self-improvement and advancement. Jesus never compromised the call of God to do great things, but stressed service as the vehicle for doing so. In his strategic model, there was no greater service in the Kingdom of God than to be a slave. He came to give his life as a ransom for others. I have been in meetings of high officials in Thailand, where servants bringing tea and coffee crawl across the room, so as not to be higher in stature than those in authority. In the West, we shrink from the notion of personal humility.

The church and greatness

Secular attitudes to greatness creep into the church. Ecclesiastical leadership is often political. There is nothing new in that. But when Jesus called his disciples, he shepherded, taught and mentored them in God's love and character. You would think that three years with Jesus would have taught James and John the nature of service. But it was not to be (not yet anyway). On a subsequent occasion they suggested calling down fire from heaven on those who didn't honour them (Luke 9:51-56). They were nick-named Sons of Thunder"; they were violent, explosive, demanding, imperious and intolerant. They mistakenly thought that being disciples gave them prestige. They acted as though following Jesus was an apprenticeship for power and authority in the Kingdom. Like many Christians today, they acted as though they were middle rankers in a spiritual caste system. Was Jesus a King? If so, they would be his Cabinet. How they would love being his gate-keepers and policy-makers. Then they would be truly important and people would address them with lofty titles and deference.

In the world success is measured in terms of the number of people serving us. There is no special talent in serving others, no sense of a life-goal being achieved. It is easy to reason like the world. Only when the Holy Spirit starts to bring about radical change inside can we think differently. After describing the world's attitudes to greatness Jesus added, "Whoever wants to be great among you, let him be your servant". Whoever wants to be your chief should be your servant. The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28).

It is not wrong to want to do something great, something noble, excellent and lasting for God, but to do so simply to be better than others is pride, selfishness, ambition and idolatry. The disciples wanted to be honoured without service, to sit back and enjoy the trip and the perks. I once heard a little boy say to his father, "Thanks, Servant". It sounded somewhat humorous at the time, but there are Christians just like that. Jesus said this is thinking just like the pagan world. If you want God to use you, he will need to deal with you; pride, self-seeking and ambition will need to be crucified.

The genuine Christian world view is paradoxical. Greatness comes from humility. True honour comes from esteeming others better than ourselves. It is easy to receive praise, but harder to serve. The kingdom of God turns society's models upside down. Those who great in the world are often small in God's sight.

It is a fact of life that the things for which we labour long and hard ultimately turn to dust. The way of Christ is to be liberated by bearing the burdens of others (Galatians 6:2). Even Jesus did not please himself, but put the needs of others above his own (Romans 15:1-3). If such a practice were implemented in business circles, some firms would go bankrupt. The charter of the Kingdom of God is not to emulate the world.

Learning to serve

It is easy to pay lip service to Jesus' model. It is harder to put it into practice. We can be so busy "serving God" that we don't have time to serve God? As I have travelled around the world people have jokingly said to me, "I'll carry your bags". This is often only a cloak for a contrived sense of humility; the heart is not in it.

I have a pin tray given to me in jest by a family member many years ago. A young man in a blue dressing gown stares out at the holder and remarks, "It's hard to be humble, when you are so great". My sister gave me an old recording of the song "O Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way". Is that the way you think (even part of the time)?

Our response to Jesus' teaching can be to institutionalise Christian service, to make mottoes and sing about them, so that others will notice and be impressed. Take foot washing, for example. When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples he did so to inculcate service; as he served them, so they should serve one another. Over the centuries, foot washing has become an institution. Each Good Friday the Pope washes the feet of twelve people. We have foot washing churches. We are humble, and we are proud of it. Some readers might think I am being too harsh. I hope not. In the New Testament culture, slaves washed the feet of their masters and guests. That is not part of our culture. But it was not part of Jesus' culture for the master to wash the feet of his disciples either. Jesus was acting contrary to everything his culture stressed. The disciples should have been serving him. If we are looking for ways to serve one another within our cultural expressions, we will find them.

Jesus' model does not imply Christians should not aspire to be in positions of authority, in business, church, public life, the scientific establishment, academia, or wherever else they choose to work, but that if they do so their character should remain untarnished, like that of Jesus. As we work to build the Christian community and touch the world for Christ, the thing that will make a difference is not a human definition of greatness but a willingness to serve, as members of the "Body" of Christ (read 1 Corinthians 12). As we serve others we are exhibiting service to Jesus (cf Matthew 25:40). We should not see service as a burden, but as an opportunity to use what we have and can do for him.

People usually gravitate to authority and power, even when it is abused. Our purpose in life, on the other hand, is to serve God. Our reward comes from him. "Always remember, your hard work for the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58; 1 Corinthians 10:24).