

BY WHAT EXAMPLES DO YOU LEAD?

Today's Text: Jn 13: 2- 20

Extracts:

And supper being ended ...Jesus ... rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He girded...So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. *If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.* Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" [Jn 13: 2-5, 12-17]

William H. Millard, 79, was once listed as one of the richest men in America.¹ A college dropout, he pioneered in the 1970's a technology that turned his company, ComputerLand, into a huge PC retail chain with about 800 stores around the country. His personal stake in that business was valued at over \$1 billion. Then in 1990, he simply disappeared from public view. Recently, however, he was traced to the Cayman Islands in the Caribbean by US tax authorities to whom Mr. Millard now owes over \$100 million in back taxes.

We cannot say why Mr. Millard has been on the run for the past 20 years but as the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of his company, he occupied a leadership position. What example of integrity did he show his subordinates and others that looked up to him? Are we any different or better? How have we used the privilege that God has given us as parents or teachers or priests or leaders at work or in public office? Are we proud of our record? In this week's study, Jesus washed His disciples' feet in order to teach them a lesson in leadership humility which He encouraged them to practise. What lesson can we learn from that story? Let us find out.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: Pat Prescott, "ComputerLand CEO Found 20 Years Later, William H. Millard," <http://www.newsoxy.com/odd/ceo-20-years-30335.html> Sept. 14, 2011; and "Missing CEO William H. Millard Found After 20 Years Hiding in the Caribbean with \$100 million in unpaid Taxes," <http://gossiponthis.com/2011/09/14/missing-ceo-william-h-millard-found-after-20-years-with-100-million-in-unpaid-taxes/>, Wed., Sept. 14, 2011

1. Background: Jesus washes His disciples' feet

A leader is somebody who occupies a supervisory position over others. S(he) can be, for example, a parent with children, a school principal, a boss at work or public office or a pastor/priest. Leaders are responsible for themselves as well as those under their control. Therefore, it is a rare privilege as well as a dangerous job. If you do it well, you will be commended but if you do it badly, God will hold you accountable for it. For example, God saw David's sins of adultery (with Bathsheba) and murder (of her husband) as a great occasion the king had provided for the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme [2 Sam. 12: 14]. Therefore, leadership is a subject to which we should pay serious attention.

This week's Bible story begins soon after Jesus had instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion during the Last Supper. John's Gospel omits the details of that event (recorded only in the Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke) but refers to it where he wrote, "Supper being ended" [Jn 13: 2]. Interestingly, only John's Gospel carries the story of Christ's washing of the disciples' feet. The story can be examined as follows:

a) *The Timing*

Jesus was about to "depart from this world to the Father" [v. 1]. It was on the night that He was betrayed. In a matter of hours, He would be arrested by the Jewish leaders, preparatory to His trial, crucifixion and death the following day. Ordinarily, His heart should be heavy with sorrow. Yet, He still felt the need to leave with His disciples an important principle of leadership humility. In the three years that they had walked and worked with Him, the disciples had come to know so many things about their Master. Yet, the last act that He was going to leave with them had to do with leadership humility.

To be humble is to willingly give up your privileges without necessarily demeaning your office. For example, the Head of State can break any traffic rules without being penalized by traffic police officers. But if s(he) chooses to obey them, that will not stop him or her from being treated or regarded as the Head of State. In fact, that may earn him or her more respect from citizens, especially voters. A CEO who eats in the same canteen with his or her junior staff raises the status of that eating place as well as his or her standing with subordinates. So, humility is good!

b) *The Act*

To teach that lesson to His disciples, Jesus "laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself." Then He poured water into a basin and began washing the feet of His disciples' one after the other. After washing each foot, He wiped it with the towel [vv. 4-5]. To Peter, that was too much!

So, he asked Jesus, “Lord, are You washing my feet?” Peter protested and added, “You shall never wash my feet!” [vv. 6-8].

Peter had every reason to be shocked by what he saw. He had seen Jesus perform numerous miracles. He had seen Him transfigured. He knew the honour and glory that Jesus received from His Father and he, James and John had “heard this voice which came from heaven when [they] were with Him on the holy mountain” [2 Pet. 1: 16- 18]. Peter knew how the Jewish leaders, especially the scribes and the Pharisees, put “heavy burdens, hard to bear ... on men’s shoulders, but they themselves [would] not move them with one of their fingers” [Matt. 23: 4].

How many of us can lay aside our official gadgets of position, pomp and power to pay attention to the needs of our subordinates? What is your reaction when you hear that your office assistant came late to work because his wife had just been hospitalized in an emergency and his medical insurance did not cover her treatment? When David threw away his outer garment and leaped and whirled before the Lord as the ark of God was being carried from the house of Obed-Edom into the City of David, his wife, Michal “despised him in her heart” for uncovering himself ‘in the eyes of the maids of his servants as one of the base fellows shamelessly uncovers himself’ [2 Sam. 6: 12-23]. Humility has its prize and price!

c) *The Meaning & Implication*

After the exercise, Jesus explained it to His disciples. Yes, they called Him their Lord and Teacher. They spoke the truth. He added, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet, for I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” [Jn 13: 12-15]. Did that mean that they should go about washing other people’s feet? No! ***The exercise was a metaphor for leadership humility.*** What He meant was amplified in the next two verses where Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” [vv. 16-17].

Elsewhere, when there was a dispute among the disciples as who was the greatest among them, Jesus taught them, “He who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves, for who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet ***I am among you as the One who serves***” [Lk 22: 24-27].

From the forgoing, we learn that leadership is a two-way street. By definition, a leader is already recognized as the head of the pack but do not flaunt it. ***If you carry yourself well, that is, if you are humble, you will be exalted. But if you let your position get into your head and do not respect or care about those below***

you, you will be humiliated in that your worth in their eyes will be diminished.
The choice is yours. Would you rather be humble or humiliated?

2. The road to true leadership humility

You may never know how successful you are as a leader until you leave office. By that time, you cannot change your record! For example, your children are married and have left home. Or you may have retired from your job or pastoral office after many years of service. In all such cases, can you go back to undo certain things that you now regret? Therefore, now is the time for you to get things right so that you can beat your chest in the future for a successful tenure. Here is a suggested road map that you can follow if you want to know and practise true leadership humility:

a) *Look up to Jesus as your role model*

Abraham Lincoln, Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela inspire all of us for their leadership qualities, such as self-sacrifice for the sake of the downtrodden in their respective eras and countries. A close study of their biographies suggests that the turning point came for them the moment they let God rule their hearts over the issues that bothered their followers. To rely on one's "smartness" can be shortsighted and unhelpful. For example, even when King Nebuchadnezzar appreciated the fact that "the Most High rules in the kingdom of men [and] gives it to whomever He will," success intoxicated him to the extent that he began to boast, saying, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honour of my majesty?" As soon as such pride oozed out of his mouth, God struck him with insanity and he was driven out of the palace. He lived like an animal for seven years [Dan. 4: 17-31]. That is why the word of God says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" [Prov. 16: 18] but "before honour is humility" [Prov. 15: 33]. You need more than hard work to be a successful leader.

Jesus voluntarily gave up His divinity to take human form in obedience to His Father's plan to save us from sin, and "being found in appearance as man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death on the cross" [Phil. 2: 8]. While in human form, Jesus did everything by looking up to His Father as His role model. For example, in one place, He told His listeners, "I can of Myself do nothing... I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me" [Jn 5: 30]. Yet, He and His Father are equal [Jn 10: 30]. By honouring His Father with His humility, Jesus became exalted among men and without Him, you can do nothing [Jn 15: 5]. So, when you look up to Jesus as the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12: 2], you will be anchored to His Father and, thus, firmly established in true and authentic leadership humility.

b) *Treat others as you want them to treat you!*

You may not be able to achieve your excellent results without help from others, especially subordinates. Therefore, you must know how to work with others. Unfortunately, many people are lone rangers. They cannot work with others without friction. For example, some people cannot work in groups they cannot dominate. Some people hide their incompetence or laziness when they participate in group work. Some pay more attention to the process than the output. Most subordinates' loyalty to you may depend on their own individual interests or gains, not necessarily their commitment to your goals and aspirations. The only way that you can successfully relate to others (both superiors and subordinates) is to treat them the way you want to be treated.

You will certainly prefer a boss who appreciates your contributions to his/her success. As a subordinate, you will want to work for a leader who wants to empower you through continuous skills upgrading and rewards; a leader that cares about your personal problems. Why can you not do the same for those who work under you?

Take the example of Jesus. At His baptism, His Father openly acknowledged to the world that Jesus was His beloved Son in whom He was well pleased [**Lk 3: 22**]. Therefore, Jesus never lost any opportunity to tell His listeners about His Father. After choosing twelve disciples as His principal subordinates, He lived with them and they slept in the open fields because the Son of Man had nowhere to lay His head [**Matt. 8: 20**]. When Peter's mother-in-law was sick, Jesus found time to go to her house and lay hands on her and she got well [**Mk 1: 29-31**]. Jesus felt His followers' pain and hunger and always had compassion on them [**Matt. 14: 14**]. He called them His friends [**Jn 15: 15**] and assured them that they would do greater things after His own departure [**Jn 14: 12**]. Once you anchor your leadership humility on God by Christ Jesus, you can relate to your bosses and subordinates the same way.

c) *Humility defines your character!*

Jesus told His disciples, after washing their feet, "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done" [**Jn 13: 15**]. The said example had less to do with hard work or ability to work with others. Rather, it had to do more with character- ***the extent to which you have completely surrendered to the will of God until the day He calls you home***. That is how God measures your true worth. For example, can you be trusted as a leader? If you are a man, can you be trusted with women, especially the vulnerable young women under you? Do you sexually harass them? If you are a woman, can you be trusted with the vulnerable young men under your care as well? As the head of your unit, do you use

public or official resources for your personal gains? Without the fear of God, you are likely to fail when confronted by each of those tempting moments.

See how Jesus inspired and empowered the people that He encountered. For example, each time He healed the sick, He never attributed it to His own powers but to their faith [**Matt. 15: 28**]. To the woman caught in adultery, He told her that He did not condemn her but that she should go and sin no more [**Jn 8: 11**]. Even after the great scene of the Transfiguration that revealed His divinity to Peter, James and John, He enjoined them to tell no man until after His resurrection [**Matt. 17: 9**]. Today, an average pastor would put such testimony concerning his ministry on TBN! Even on the night of His arrest, Jesus was not distinguishable from the rest of His disciples and it had to take Judas Iscariot to point Him out to His enemies [**Matt. 26: 48**]. Look at the group of women who ministered to Him. It included Mary Magdalene from whom He had cast out seven demons [**Lk 8: 2-3**].

At the time that Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, they already knew that their Teacher and Master was an epitome of humility. *He was among them as the One who served and yet He was their Master. That is the lesson that you should learn from this week's study. It will speak volumes for your leadership success.* It will confirm that you are God-fearing, not just self-serving!

3. Conclusion: Learn humility from the Master!

Exaltation is from God [**Ps. 75: 6**] and He has put you in a leadership position, not for your self-aggrandizement but for His glory. Use the privilege wisely by being humble and God-fearing at all times.

Learn that from your Master, Jesus.