

## John Howell – Sermon - 21 October 2018

Job 38: 1-7, 19-21

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: <sup>2</sup>“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? <sup>3</sup>Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

<sup>4</sup>“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. <sup>5</sup>Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? <sup>6</sup>On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone <sup>7</sup>when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? <sup>19</sup>“Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, <sup>20</sup>that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home? <sup>21</sup>Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great!

### Mark 10:35-45

<sup>35</sup>James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” <sup>38</sup>But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” <sup>39</sup>They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” <sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

There is an article in the American magazine “The Atlantic” about the Vice-President Mike Pence.

[quote] Marc Short, a longtime adviser to Pence and a fellow Christian, told [the reporter] that the vice president believes strongly in a scriptural concept evangelicals call “servant leadership.” The idea is rooted in the Gospels, where Jesus models humility by washing his disciples’ feet and teaches, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” When Pence was in Congress, he instructed his aides to have a “servant’s attitude” when dealing with constituents. Later, as the chairman of the House Republican Conference, he saw his job as being a servant to his fellow GOP lawmakers. And when he accepted the vice-presidential nomination, he believed he was committing to humbly submit to the will of Donald Trump. “Servant leadership is biblical,” Short told me. “That’s at the heart of it for Mike, and it comes across in his relationship with the president.” Another close friend of Pence’s explained it to me this way: “His faith teaches that you’re under authority at all times. Christ is under God’s authority, man is under Christ’s authority, children are under the parents’ authority, employees are under the employer’s authority.” “Mike,” he added, “always knows who’s in charge.” [end quote]

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/01/gods-plan-for-mike-pence/546569/>

This morning our gospel reading is about being a servant. I will explore the application of servant leadership by looking at example of the Vice-President and his theology and the dilemmas it raises.

There are two factors in the quote I took from the Atlantic monthly article. The first is how Mike Pence tries to apply servant leadership in his work. In fact according to the NY Times: Mr. Pence describes himself as “a Christian, a conservative and a Republican, in that order.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/16/us/politics/mike-pence-history.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer>

The second factor is Mr Pence's view of authority. To repeat the quote:

"His faith teaches that you're under authority at all times. Christ is under God's authority, man is under Christ's authority, children are under the parents' authority, employees are under the employer's authority." "Mike," he added, "always knows who's in charge."

Mr Pence sees himself as humbly submitting to the will of his President. When Donald Trump's actions with women entered the public arena, it was made plain that Mr Trump often broke the biblical commands about adultery. The gospels say nothing about homosexuality or abortion, but they do have a lot to say about adultery. Now this presents a real dilemma for Mr Pence and the evangelical fundamentalists to which he belongs. The way this dilemma is resolved is to ignore it, and Mr Pence has taken to telling people that basically the President is a nice guy. So the dilemma for Mr Pence is what he makes of servant leadership in this context. The dilemma is which Master does he serve?

What is the meaning of service in the Mark 10:43-45? Eduard Schweizer in his commentary on Mark (page 219) says that serving in the Greek primarily means 'waiting on tables', and he quotes the equivalent passage in Luke 22:27

"For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves"

It is clear from this passage that service does not mean submission. It is therefore a misunderstanding by Mr Pence of what service means - service does not mean submission.

When Mr Pence says he is a Christian first, we might ask what kind of Christian? Mr Pence is known as a Rapture Christian. Rapture Christians take literally the second coming of Christ, and predict the end of the world is coming. Millenarianism takes Revelation chapter 20 literally. Belief in the Rapture, also known as millenarianism or eschatology, has multiple variations, but the core view is that there will an apocalyptic war, Jesus will return, and true Christians will be "raptured" or ascend to heaven, with the rest of the earth's inhabitants punished. Rapture believers are split about the order of events, but they are united in the belief that only Christians will be saved.

<https://qz.com/1270516/jerusalem-embassy-trumps-foreign-policy-looks-like-rapture-christians-plan-to-trigger-apocalypse/>

Rapture theologians and historical evangelicals hold several other views that hew closely to Trump administration policies. They believe that earth was created for man's use, for example, and that environmentalism is a form of blasphemy.

Now it appears that a significant number of Trump's executive are rapture Christians, and a rapture preacher holds regular bible study in the White House.

I remember as a theological student in Wellington at the time, the Rev Bob Scott interviewed a preacher who was predicting that the end of the world would arrive at the New Year. Bob had a slot on the local radio, and decided to interview him before and after his predicted date. If you go the the web and insert "Predictions and claims for the second coming of Christ" you will see an extensive list of people who have announced dates for the end of the world. To this point all predictions have failed, which is one good reason why the mainstream Christian traditions do not literally interpret the symbolism in the book of Revelation.

The presence of Rapture Christians in the White House raises all kind of questions about the separation of Church and State, about the theological and scientific illiteracy of White house appointments, and the preventable dilemmas that come from not reading your bible with care. The secular society tends to wipe religious belief off into the dustbin of history, with the result that in the ensuing vacuum, the bizarre and

the extreme fill the void. To use the image of “servant” we do a disservice if we ignore the wisdom of the sacred books. But the need is to study and find the wisdom to serve the table of our world.

So what can we say about servant leadership? Servant leadership is not greedy. A little bit of servant leadership is needed when we consider some of the pay packets of our State Owned Enterprises, and Crown entities. Servant leadership wants the people at the table we serve to be filled with good food, both physically and spiritually. A servant leadership is careful so the food they serve is not wasted. Servant leadership is prepared to make sacrifices. Servant leadership is not a vocation reserved for women. Servant leadership does not do deals under the table. A servant leader does not compromise their integrity, and serves the truth. Servant leadership does not submit to bullies. Servant leadership honours respect, and acts with grace. Servant leadership reads the ancient texts with care to find its wisdom for today.

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