

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
The Second Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B' (proper 10)
6 June, 2021
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

After every election, a misanthropic acquaintance of mine always says, “Well, people get the leaders they deserve.” And I guess they do. His statement isn’t original, of course. It’s a variation of Joseph de Maistre’s aphorism, “People get the governments they deserve.” But no matter: the sentiment is the same for individuals and nations — or any organization, for that matter.

We see this axiom play out in our reading from First Samuel this morning. The people want a king. They *need* a king — or so they think. Samuel isn’t so sure this is a good idea (maybe because he feels slighted by their desire for different leadership) and so he retreats in prayer. And what does he hear? God telling him, in effect, “Well, now you know how I feel.” Even so, Samuel tries to discourage the Israelites from getting a king by telling them how a king will take from them — their children, their property, their wealth. But he says nothing about what the king will *give* to them. And we all know that the ancient Israelites’ kings were a mixed bag — to say the least.

But the history of ancient Israel isn’t what interests me this morning, and I don’t think this is primarily a story about the inadvisability of kingship. I think that at its core this is a story about how societies — how you and I — so often confuse what we *want* with what we *need*. Certainly there was a time in human history when getting what we need was all we could do, but we are long past those days. Now it’s getting what we want — or trying to— which motivates us, even though we’re loathe to admit it. We need only think about our economy. It depends on us perpetually buying not only what we need, but — more importantly — what we want. This is why we’re in such a mess these days. It’s no secret that the businesses which are struggling right now are exactly the ones which specialize in selling things people don’t need.

Now, don’t get me wrong: the plight of small business owners is real and heart-breaking. And, as you will no doubt discover in time, I am not one who lives the austere simple life of an anchorite! A few months ago an antiques dealer I follow on Instagram put up a picture of an eighteenth century Chinoiserie reverse-painted mirror. I texted a screenshot of it to a friend of mine and said, “All of a sudden my life seems so empty without this.” And I would have bought it, but I didn’t have a spare £75,000 right then ...

You see, there’s a deep emptiness within that all of us are trying to fill with stuff: antiques, electronics, travel, junk food, booze — whatever. We rationalize the satisfaction of these wants by telling ourselves that having them will make us happy.

But of course, they never do and so the vicious cycle continues. Consumer consumption is a disease for which there seems to be no cure, so what do we do?

Well, we look to our King — Jesus, the Christ. But when we do, we realize that here is a king the people neither wanted nor desired. Yet he was the king they needed. And he's the king *we* need, too — not because we can offer him the service of royalty but because he shows us the royalty of service in which we discover that meeting another's need is, deep down, what we really want because it's what gives us joy.

Which brings me to the present moment and this new adventure in ministry you and I have begun. In the last sermon I preached as Dean of Calgary I said that when they learned I'd resigned, many of my colleagues told me I'd lost my mind, especially since I'd wanted to be the Dean for so long. And it's true: I was the incumbent of the Cathedral for ten years before I was given the Decanal preferment which I'd wanted all those ten years. And it was undeniably wonderful to take on the rôle and its responsibilities, and I believe I discharged them with reasonable competence. But if I'm to be truly honest, maybe it was the trappings of the office — the title 'The Very Reverend', the magenta cassock, the place in procession right before the bishop — that I *really* wanted. Or at least, I *thought* they were.

Because I soon discovered that what I actually wanted was the courage to step out from behind the façade, the costumes, the persona and be the real me. The trappings of the office can become a trap. But they can also lead to liberation.

Which means we need to be careful. All of this — our history, the beauty of this place, its prominence in this community— all of this can be a trap if we're not careful. What we *want* is for people to look up to and admire us for what we are: a grand and historic institution. But what we *need* to be are folks who bear all of this glorious history lightly — not frivolously or carelessly, but lightly — and who can therefore go where help is needed.

Now, what I've just said isn't very original, I grant you that. It may even be plainly obvious. But that doesn't make it any less true. I love the beauty and history of this place, and that's huge part of why I felt called to come to be among you. But I haven't come because I wanted a grand rectory, or an historic church, or a colonial cemetery — though folks who know me might very well assume I've come for exactly those things. No: I've come because I, like all of you, need to follow the call of God and dare to journey into the grand adventure of faith which has no map.

But it does have guides. And just as I am now charged with the awesome task of guiding you, so too are you given the no less daunting challenge of helping to guide me. We're in this together. We *want* to be in this together. But we also *need* to be, for Christ's sake. And I mean that literally because, as I said in the parish email last week, you and I are called to be his hands and feet and eyes and heart in the world. He's the leader we don't deserve but who nonetheless wants us and who is enthroned on your heart — and mine — forevermore.