

SERMON

Easter 6 C

Deuteronomy 34.1-12

St Peter Quamichan

26.5.25

The death of Moses, and the succession of Joshua son of Nun, provides an interesting study in the whole experience of a change in leadership. It is a sort of parable. I could imagine Jesus telling it to you.

Moses was a beloved, if curmudgeonly, leader of his people. Moreover, he was beloved of *God*, a special friend who alone of all the prophets that have arisen from that day to this, knew God face to face. Moses had what we Anglicans would call a longterm incumbency: for over forty years he had borne with the Israelites, and (to be fair) they with him. Now, just as they are about to cross over and take possession of the Promised Land, just as they are about to reap the fruits of their wandering, and to settle into the life they have longed for, Moses stands down, and yields the leadership of the people to young Joshua. I dare say most of us can identify at least one personal experience of such a momentous change (perhaps it was the arrival of a new school principal, a new CEO, or for that matter, a new parish priest!); it isn't difficult to imagine the Israelites' uncertainty, grief, turmoil, and even excitement.

Let's explore this transition more thoroughly: we may find points of contact and wisdom to assist our own experience.

Notice first that Moses gives over to Joshua from a position of strength rather than weakness. Indeed, Moses sounds so healthy ("his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated") that it's hard to reckon how he could have died at all. So often, we seek radical change because things are no longer going well for us. You generally don't think of hiring a new head coach when the team is going to the Stanley Cup. On the contrary, it is almost always out of desperation we decide to try something, or someone, new. And while necessity truly can be the mother of invention, sometimes you can't help but wonder what potential we would be realising if we contemplated the possibilities from a position of strength. It isn't everyone who has the stomach to let go of

a good thing on the speculation that you might be able to make it better. Moses did.

At the same time, it is only fair to note that not three chapters earlier, when Moses keeps his 120th birthday (which is to say, a very short time before his death), he himself had complained of not being quite as spry as he used to be. “I am no longer able to get about,” he says. This represents something of a conflict in perceptions. And while what we may be dealing with here is nothing more than an editorial oversight, I suggest that sometimes this kind of ambiguity is precisely the signal by which God invites us to consider making a change. That is, his general vigour notwithstanding, Moses realises that he isn’t performing to the same standard he once did; he senses that he can’t manage the demands of the job any more.

For Moses to stand aside now carries the poignant consequence that he, who has worked so hard to see this day, won’t have the honour of taking the people over, and will never enjoy the fruit of his labours. As Jesus will so aptly put it many centuries later, One sows, another reaps. This is hard for us to take, isn’t it, because the guy who cuts the ribbon on the renovated parish hall will be the guy who gets the glory. A leader needs a good dose of humility to allow that to happen.

Now there is one other important factor I haven’t yet noted, which is that Moses is under discipline in this story. The truth is, he hasn’t really got any choice about who takes the people over. For way back at Meribah, Moses had disobeyed the Lord God, and for his penance, God decreed that he would not be the one to lead the people into the Promised Land. Sometimes the need to “move on” in our lives comes by compulsion, by a profound sense of vocation, or even of divine fiat; and sometimes it comes in the wake of our own bumbling, or for that matter of the self-promoting manoeuvrings of the upstart wannabe. My point is only this: Moses had every reason to look upon Joshua with envy; every reason to allow that envy to poison their relationship; every reason to make the transition from himself to his successor as ugly and unpleasant as possible. He did not do this. Somehow, Moses mustered

the grace to accept his punishment, and to impart to Joshua the wisdom he needed to take over.

But if these are the qualities exhibited by *Moses* which made for a smooth transition to a new future, we must also note the role of the *people*. The Deuteronomist tells us that they wept for Moses for thirty days. And then he says, quite matter-of-factly, “then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.” It is important, when one leader goes and another comes, to spend some time telling the stories, consolidating our communal recollection. This is, at least partly, what grief is for. I can think of times when I have followed a beloved priest as the new rector of a parish. Where things worked well, it is quite clear that the community came to a kind of agreed story, a shared myth (and by this I do not mean “fable”) about what my predecessor’s leadership had meant there. But there came a point, as there came a point for the Israelites, when the period of mourning was over, and it was time to cross the Jordan. The people, that is, allow *Joshua* to be the leader now. Life goes on. They stop their constant eulogising of Moses (Moses didn’t do it that way, or Moses tried that and it didn’t work, or I miss Moses: we’ve all heard it, we’ve all done it!), and they begin instead to seek out and name *Joshua*’s strengths. And here is the thing: Joshua will never really be their leader until they do.

And *Joshua*, for his part, is a worthy successor to Moses. The primary reason for this is that he is the Lord’s own choice: he carries within him the “spirit of wisdom”. There are lots of great leaders to be had, but they aren’t all the best choice for every context. You want a leader who is a good match for the community they serve, a leader, that is, who is *called*, whom God has made wise for this particular job. It helps of course that the beloved Moses validates this vocation for the people by laying hands on Joshua, by grooming him, and by modelling his own firm support. There is nothing that can undermine new leadership quite so quickly as surreptitious consultations with the predecessor. The death of Moses renders this impossible, of course; but one has the impression he would never have allowed it. Moses yields to the Lord God’s choice, just as he expects the people to do.

Joshua, meanwhile, recognises that even though he is taking the people new places, he is following in a tradition already established through Moses. He isn't free to start all over again, as it were, or to make the Israelites into his own image and likeness. As one preacher told the candidates at an ordination, Always remember that you are God's gift to the Church; the Church is not God's gift to you. You know the type: the sort of leader who doesn't wait to find out who the people are or why they are the way they are, before imposing his or her own style, rules, and expectations. Joshua's job is to honour the community's tradition. It is to teach them to obey all that Moses had commanded them, and thus to equip them for life in the Promised Land.

The death of Moses signals a huge change for the Israelites: the end of a long and arduous chapter in their collective history, and the beginning of new hopes, and dreams, and visions. The transition from one to the other was symbolised, at least in part, by the succession of Joshua to the leadership of the people of Israel. It was a transition that worked, and it worked first because God ordained it, and then because Moses, the people, and Joshua alike made sure that it did.