

EXODUS 18  
MINISTRY – GOD’S TEAM!

I came across an order of service printed in a book I was reading. The writer had been visiting a congregation and was taken with what he read. The order of service leaflet was not unlike our: inside was an order of service for the Sunday service, with the hymns and readings; and the notices for week were on the other page, these are the things that are happening. On the outside front cover were the details of the congregation: the name of the Church, its address, its contact details and then at the bottom of the front cover – “Ministers – the whole congregation!” There was a sense that everyone in the church has a ministry to exercise, a job to do, a part to play in the body of Christ, the Church. We hear that and nod our heads vigorously – that’s how church should be, you say, ideally.

Here’s another story, a true story to balance that with other perceptions: someone was ill: the flower-deliverer calls to bring flowers from the church; the person with the tapes of the Sunday service calls and has a cup of tea; the pastoral care person visits and stays for a chat; the newsletter is delivered personally; there are friends who are church members and they drop in for cup of tea. But because “the minister” didn’t visit – our sick friend declared “the Church is not interested in me”! How do you react to that? The perception that underlies that view is still with us and is seriously weakening the Church in Scotland. It says that grace comes to us only through one person.

The Bible offers us a different view of things in terms of ministry and leadership. The best example of that comes in Exodus chapter 18. The people have moved on from the Red Sea where God had saved them. God is their travelling companion, leading and guiding them through the desert with the pillar of cloud during the day and the pillar of fire at night. They had some difficult situations, but God is with them and is helping them through these difficult things: He is providing food for them to eat, the manna; He gives them water when they’re thirsty; He is helping them defeat their enemies. Life is beginning to settle down as this community of people not only travels to the Promised Land, but settles into some kind of community life. What values and standards are these people to adopt? How are they to shape their life as a community of God’s people, God traveling with them? Over the next part of the story we see some answers to these questions.

“Behind every successful man is a surprised mother-in-law!” You’ve heard that before! Here, Moses’ father-in-law comes to visit. Moses had lived with Jethro in the desert for nearly 40 years before going back to Egypt; Mos had been the shepherd of Jethro’s sheep; most of all, Moses had married Jethro’s daughter! It looks as if Moses had sent his wife and children home for safe-keeping during the exodus times and Jethro is bringing them back. More than that, he has heard of all that God has done and comes to worship God: the Gentile priest is accepted as part of the people of God, as he delights in all that God has done for Israel. *“Now I...” (Exodus 18:11a)* Like most in-laws, he’s come to stay for a few days and wanders round the camp while people go about their daily business, collecting manna etc. He watches Moses be the leader and what he sees leaves him deeply concerned.

*“The next day...” (Exodus 18:13)* Moses is being the leader for God’s people. *“The people...” (Exodus 18:15)* There are all kinds of pictures that we could use to try to understand what Moses is doing. People have disputes with one another about things and they come to Moses to resolve these disputes; others are not sure about how to live their lives in God’s way, so they come to Moses to ask their question and find an answer. Maybe there are other questions and issues as well. Moses sits on

his seat as “judge” (though that probably means something different) and people queue up around the block to get some time with him so that they can tell him their problem and have him answer. There is something great about this: here is the people of God looking to order and shape their lives by doing the will of God: “What does God want us to do? How can we do the will of God in this situation? Tell us Moses!” They queue up all day to learn the will of God for their lives; there is no diary system by which you book an appointment in advance; you just turn up, first come, first served. Jethro watches all of this going on and doesn’t like what he sees.

At end of day, over dinner, Jethro began to talk to Moses about the process. Now, this is dangerous. I’m not sure how you react when people want to tell you how to do your job, but it doesn’t always go down well. “What do they know?” *“Now Moses...”* (Numbers 12:3) The qualities of being humble – one of them is the willingness to listen to someone else’s viewpoint. Moses listens. Jethro has two concerns and a solution. *“What you...”* (Exodus 18:17f) Concern number 1: the people are standing around all day, waiting for a chance to be guided by Moses, but so many of them are going away unheard, unanswered, dissatisfied, because the queue is so long. Most of the people will either have to come back the next day or solve their problems in a way other than God’s way. The people are unheard. Concern number 2: Moses is wearing himself out trying to do all of this on his own and it is too much for him. Jethro sees that all too clearly and is concerned for the health and well-being of his son-in-law.

The solution: team ministry! Share the load. Moses has his job to do – *“you must...”* (Exodus 18:19b) There are some things that only Moses can do and these things he is to be given time and space to do, to represent the people before God and bring God’s word to them, to deal with the hardest cases. *“But select...”* (Exodus 18:21f) Other people are to take on some of the work, the simpler cases they can handle on their own without needing to involve Moses at all. This has two effects: the people go away satisfied, they have been heard and their case has been dealt with; and the work of leadership is shared to everyone’s benefit. So for the first time in the Bible we see the concept of the elder of the people, a team of leaders who can minister to the people, care for the people, support, help, guide the people; capable men, men of faith, trustworthy men. I can imagine the disappointment: “oh, I wanted to talk to Moses himself, but I’m only getting an elder!” But did that disappointment turn to surprise? “Ah, the grace of God has come to me through the elder!” Disappointment turned to delight because God is at work and the people are satisfied; they know the will of God and they do it. This is the ministry of the team!

Titus was converted under Paul’s ministry and became a Christian leader working alongside the apostle. By the time Paul writes this letter to him, Titus is the leader of the Church on the island of Crete, working there to build up the Church and help the church to grow in faith and in Christian service. I’m fascinated by the piece we read from chapter 2 today: we have the usual bits that we might expect: *“You must...”* (Titus 2:1) and other instructions to Titus himself about being a Christian leader there. But it is this other bit that fascinates me; we need to get past the cultural references of the first century and see what this stands for: *“Teach the...”* (Titus 2:3f) There are some cultural references there that we might find don’t fit our time, but there is model of ministry here. The older women have a leadership role to the play in mentoring the younger women; the older women are a model of faith and life for the others; their job is to teach, lead, guide, mentor, help these younger women to put the Christian faith into practice in their life. Titus has a leadership job to do, and so too does this unnamed group of older women. Titus is not the only Christian minister in Crete; he is the only one whose name we know; the older women have a ministry, the slaves have ministry of evangelism as you’ll see if you read on.

There are several issues around in church life that are addressed by Exodus 18: we live in a day of celebrity culture, people hanging on the every word of the celebrity and follow them on Twitter; they shape lives by what the celebrity says or wears. There is a danger of the day of the celebrity preacher when people flock to a church because a certain preacher is there and when he leaves, they leave too! Why do some of you stay away when I'm not here? The day is coming when people like me will be rare; we are an endangered species! The day is not too far distant when numbers of ministers like me will retire and there are already very few to take our places. There are around 800 of us for now; there will be about a quarter of that number in 20 years time. What then will the church do for leadership? It is so important that our understanding of Christian ministry and leadership is shaped by the Bible and not by our culture and not by the problems we face.

What does Christian ministry shaped by Bible look like? The Church is the body of Christ where everyone is part of the body and every part of the body has a gift to use and a job to do. The leadership that Jesus created for the church was a team – there were at least 12 of them, called to be apostles, people who would lead the church, be its ministers and there were more than 12! There will always be a place for people giving themselves full-time, being academically trained to be ministers within the Church, but their place in the life of the Church will change! Christian ministry that is shaped by Bible will give everyone a place to exercise their gifts and take on responsibility so that God is glorified and the Church is built and the kingdom grows. This is not about me; this is not a knee-jerk reaction to a crisis facing the Church in Scotland; this is a considered way of the Bible as it describes leadership and ministry in the people of God.

Malcolm is a retired bank manager; an elder in his congregation. The circumstances of his congregation mean that he is having to take on more responsibility than otherwise he might. He was taking the service in his congregation on the Sunday we were there on holiday and he preached; it was not the best sermon I've ever heard, but I'll tell you this, the grace of God was given to us by his ministry; by his ministry we were encouraged, instructed, challenged and delighted because God was there and grace was poured out into our hearts. This is about expectations: were the people disappointed they were not "getting Moses"? But the grace of God was poured out into their hearts and minds by the ministries of others, by people whose names we're never told. God is at work! This is about gifts and responsibilities. What is God doing in Church? Has He stopped calling people to leadership? Or is this the time for the Church to rediscover ministry as the bible models it – God's team ministry of all the people? We share the grace of God with one another.