

1 Samuel 1. 2-20

1 Samuel 2. 1-10

Mark 13. 1-8

In the course of the last four or five decades there has been a reduction in the number of people in our society who participate in community organisations. Every kind of organisation is facing questions of vitality and viability in the wake of a contraction of numbers. Political parties, masonic lodges, unions, scouts, Rotary and other kinds of service organisations and, of course, churches. We are not alone in this contraction; although we might like to tell ourselves we are alone in this, and so are filled with a kind of self-recrimination as a result of that.

Maybe the tension we face over what seemed to be so vitally important to communal life in our formative years, is that the post-war society in which most of our lives were formed, was enriched in so many ways by community organisations. What's interesting about this contraction of involvement is that it has gone hand in hand with the growth of individualism in our community.

The people we were raised by pretty much understood themselves communally, collectively. People's identity was tied up in family, church, work and organisations of various kinds. People were who they were because of the connections they had; and these shaped and guided their lives. My grandmother died in 1922, leaving my grandfather and five children. My grandfather's two spinster sisters who lived just here in Selwyn St, sold up and moved to the Wimmera, to support him and his family. Their lives were tied up with my grandfather's. For our forebears their identity was tied up in the group – the family, the church tribe, whether catholic or protestant, and whatever particular denominational tribe we were born into.

The reality is that the majority of people in the world understand themselves collectively – that identity, indeed personhood – cannot be conceived of apart from the group. We individualists are the anomaly.

And while we may have been raised by people who understood themselves collectively, we have been steeped in a growing culture where, as Simon and Garfunkel sang, *I am a rock, I am an island*. But this is the way so many of our children and grandchildren now understand their personhood – in a kind of atomised way. Alistair Macrae last week made reference to Margaret Thatcher's comment in 1979 that *there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families*. Having been raised by people who understood themselves collectively we face a difficult tension when we find ourselves engaging with people whose world seems to be just themselves, their opinions, their preferences, their ideologies.

In the church we are called to a different way of being. A congregation is not a conglomeration of individuals, each trying to have our opinions heard. Rather, our vision is to be a people seeking to be a new creation, shaped in the pattern of Jesus, his life and teachings. This is sometimes costly, messy, uncomfortable and counter-cultural. Meaning we have to be aware of our egos and the way these often lead to distress in the community – both our assertive, sometimes manipulative egos and our fragile egos – trying to get our way by praying on others' pity.

One of the tensions I experience as a minister and which I observe across the church is that we are a people seeking to be a new creation but we have to frame and order and guide our life together through the medium of an organisation; an organisation with buildings and assets, and holding a place or status in our society with obligations about the ways we must conduct our life, which accords with the values and commitments and laws of our society.

The church, while its reason for being is “not of this world”, as Jesus says to Pilate, operates in place and time and by a social license which is granted by our society. This social license in Australia means that we are free to practice our faith – and there are both privileges and obligations for us to be able to continue to do this. We must function in ways which engender trust in the wider community. We can see from the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, this week that there are obligations on us with which we must be in accord with our society. The truth is that trust of the institution of the church is at an all-time low.

But what of trust within the church? Ultimately where Justin Welby lost trust was within the church, and it was other leaders in the church who called for his resignation.

I regularly receive emails from an organisation in the states called the Congregational Consulting Group. Recently I received one recently exploring the issue of trust - trust both of clergy and trust of the church as a whole. It was very revealing. The writer, John Wimbley, a church consultant who has worked on the issue of trust in churches over a decade, reminds his readers that lack of trust is endemic now – affecting just about every organisation in society. The febrile state of American society that we have seen unfold in this month’s election is clear indicator the country is in a crisis of trust which threatens to unravel the entire nation, and potentially the post-WWII world order.

Wimbley’s awareness of the widespread lack of trust in institutions across all ages has led him to research what is needed to re-create trust when it has been lost. The Ipsos Global Trust Monitor asked a test group: *Which attributes, if any, are important to you when deciding whether or not to trust an organization or institution?*

What he found was that the things we think might lead people to trust or be loyal to an organisation are not the things which really seemed to matter to people. We can be inclined to think that things like whether an organisation was well led – maybe by a charismatic or hard-working leader, whether the organisation has good intentions or shares it’s members values; these things didn’t matter so much to people when they thought about whether they trusted an organisation or not.

The things which came out on top, far outweighing other things, were: whether an organisation is reliable and kept to its commitments, whether it was open and transparent about what it does, and whether the organisation behaves responsibly. All of these might seem rather dull things but the reality is that it is these organisational characteristics or commitments which build a culture of trust. Of course these come down to the people who occupy positions of leadership but it is leadership’s task to hold an organisation to reliability, to transparency and to a commitment to a long term direction. Organisations exhibiting these characteristics garner and maintain people’s trust, and of course consequently, so do their leaders.

Wimbley writes: Clergy and religious institutions are inclined to say to people, “We have good intentions. Trust us.” “We all share the same values. Trust us.” “We have lots of good leaders.

Trust us.” You’ll recall Uncle Joh Bjelke Petersen’s standard response to journalists’ difficult question: *now just don’t you worry about that!*

But the Ipsos participants cared less about attractive leaders, good intentions and motherhood statements about values, and instead wanted to hear,

“We told you what we were going to do and we did it.” This enables people to get behind the leadership and support then and themselves step up and contribute in meaningful ways.

“Our records and decision-making are totally open. If you want to see them, just ask and we’ll get them to you.” Good communication about these things also helps people have confidence that the leadership is accountable and serving the whole.

“We are responsible stewards of our resources—people, buildings and money. We behave responsibly.” Again this is about transparency and accountability.

In our meeting after worship this morning we will use consensus decision making as a congregation for just the second time. While this process has been embraced by the Uniting church now for more than 30 years we are going to be a bit green with it for a while yet, as we become more familiar with it and learn to trust each other, to be vulnerable and honest together and to allow all the voices to be heard. I know so many feel unable to speak in a meeting such as a congregational meeting – I can recall being almost completely undone by my nervousness when I was younger. But the point of consensus is that both the confident and the nervous, but often wise voices, may be heard. There are deep theological reasons why the Uniting Church adopted this process early in its life, as we sought to be a church committed in the way we order our life and live together, which reflects the New Testament vision of being a new creation shaped in the pattern of Jesus the good shepherd.

The decision-making practices of the churches which came to Australia from Europe were often one of two things: either unconsultative and authoritarian, where men in fancy frocks at the top made binding decisions, or; where there was a kind of intimidating parliamentary system of decision making, where the silver-tongued and powerful, again often men, could powerfully sway a meeting or an organisation to their way of doing things. It is a system where often only a slim majority assert their power to get their way; and the quiet ones are rarely heard.

But as we heard Jesus say to the disciples a few weeks ago in Mark: *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.* ⁴³*But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,* ⁴⁴*and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.*

We are going to be asked to make quite a significant decision about how the life of the congregation is ordered this morning. Not simply for the sake of being bureaucratic or over-organised but so that we can create a culture of transparency and accountability and trust.

When a council of the church – a congregation, Presbytery, Synod or the Assembly - makes decisions, the aim is to discern the guidance of the Spirit in response to the word of God.

The processes we use to create community and communicate in our meetings can assist in this discernment process. This process will be heightened if people come expecting to be open both to the Spirit and to each other. In creating and sustaining effective communications in the

context of a Christian community, we will be more likely to discern the guidance of the Spirit and reflect this in our decision-making and so in our life together. In this way our faith may be vibrant.

My hope is that as today we seek to make decisions together that the spirit may be known in our midst.