

Sermon Archive 608

Sunday 25 October, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection before an election

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The First Lesson: Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

Reflection: Dick and Moses

Richard John Seddon's statue stands out the front of our parliament buildings - I emphasise "**our**" in the phrase "our parliament buildings". The house is ours. It does not belong to those who sit in it: it belongs to us who send them there. I wonder what it takes to get a statue erected in a place of such significance. Who was he?

Born in Lancashire, England, in 1845, when Te Tiriti was still young, as was the Queen whose name was put to it, he came to these shores in 1866 - aged 21. He settled in the beautiful Te Wai Pounamu, and was elected to parliament as the representative of Hokitika in 1879 - aged 34.

Given that the average age of a parliamentarian in 2026 is 49, what gets someone elected at 34? Early school reports described the child as "unruly". By age 12, he was removed from school, and went to work in his grandfather's farm. A few years later, he emigrated to Australia, stating his reasons for moving as: "a restlessness to get away to see new, broad lands seized me: My work was irksome. I felt cramped."

So, there was an element of impatience in the personality. Of that impatience, famously, he said "it is better to wear out, than to rust". He and his wife made 11 babies. Goodness me! Nine grew to adulthood. He was a pragmatist when it came to women's suffrage. Not a feminist true believer, he saw universal suffrage as inevitable, so went with the flow. On the right side of history for all the wrong reasons! He introduced a regionalism to decisions about temperance, and how local communities could make decisions about the sale of liquor in their patch. Well before what we consider to be the establishment of the welfare state, he established an old age pension. He opposed allowing Chinese people entry to the country. He compared Chinese people to monkeys, and spoke of "yellow peril" - so was what we these days

would call xenophobic - more truly "racist". He got the nick name "King Dick" because he was thoroughly autocratic - it was said that he did not **run** the government, but **was** the government. King Dick

At the age of 61, having visited Australia for a diplomatic tour, he declared that he was returning to "God's own country", had a massive heart attack, and died. Nine years later, the statue was unveiled - a 2.9 metre bronze figure atop a 4.6 metre pedestal. The statue has height!

At the unveiling of a Keith Holyoake statue in Molesworth Street, Rob Muldoon responded to a suggestion that he might one day have a statue erected in his honour. He said "They won't put up a statue to me. No, no, no. Nobody's got that sense of humour."

-ooOoo-

Deuteronomy 34 was written, I think, as a kind of statue - something to honour the sort of leadership that the people valued. Moses wasn't perfect. He angered easily; he was violent. On more than one occasion, the people grumbled about him - how he'd brought them out into the desert with no real plan. Good one, Moses! Now we're all going to die of starvation!

But when he dies, they rhapsodise him. They say of him "never since has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses . . . He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that he did . . . for all his mighty deeds - and for the twinkle he still had in his eye."

Because they were people on a journey - people not yet settled at home - they couldn't build him a statue. And anyway he had told them that God forbade graven images. So they do what they can. They mourn him for thirty days, and work out who now is going to be their leader. The new leader is always going to be measured against the standard set by Moses. They might have to settle for less, but at least they know the kind of qualities to which their leaders should aspire. They will recognise good leadership, because, imperfections notwithstanding, they have seen it before.

We are in a time of much talk about leadership - and who we should be selecting to lead us along the next stretch of our journey. Do we want better, starting now? Or do we want our basics fixed and the future begun? What kind of **qualities** do we want from those who govern us? Who has got the vision, and the character? Whose vigour has not abated? Many promises are being made - but do we know what we're looking for?

Joshua became successor to Moses, it is said, because he was full of the spirit of wisdom. I wonder what it was that made the people think that. How does the spirit of wisdom reveal itself? Is it through particular decisions that get made? Is it in certain words that reveal a carefulness of thought? Or is it, in the words of a famous Australian character, "just the vibe, your honour"?

The basic point of Deuteronomy's closing chapter is that people know good leadership when they see it - because they have seen it already. They recognise it. We sometimes erect statues to the wrong things - because we're all a mixture of good and not-so-good. Even the bronze have feet of clay. Perhaps the key to choosing good leadership is remembering the good, scouring for the spirit of wisdom, looking for the twinkle in the eye.

Two short observations before we move on. The first is that Moses had a job to do, and did it. He brought the people to the very edge of what they had been seeking - then he disappeared - got out of the way. There was no clinging on beyond the achievement of the task. It wasn't about Moses. It was about the task. The second observation is no one to this day knows the place of his burial. That's about as low profile as you can get. Where is the ego? Where is the Triumphal Arch? The name carved into the Arts Centre? The absence of these things speaks of an important aspect of leadership that blesses the people. It's not about the colossal figure. It's about the journey of the people.

More about that soon, but first some music for reflection, and a second reading.

Music for Reflection

The Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8

Reflection: Different Credentials

As Paul writes to the Thessalonians, asking for a bit of help (he's in a time of need), he presents his credentials. No, I'm not like Moses; I have no idea about Red Sea parting or bush burning, or shining faces, or water from a rock, or manna and quails, and fire and cloud. I do not bring those things
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Nor do I bring a recent success. In fact, you'll all have heard of the resounding disaster that was our trip to Philippi. Let's acknowledge **that** elephant in the room.

So why should you take us seriously? Well - because we have shown courage. We didn't give up or go away. We rode through the difficulties. We lose with grace. Also, we come with an honesty. Do you ever feel like people are telling you half the truth - or not being honest about their motivation? Well, **our** appeal to you does not spring from deceit, impure motives or trickery. With us, there's a sense of "what you see is what you get". We're not speaking to you to please you, or persuade you. We speak because God has searched our hearts. No words of flattery or pretext of greed - just a genuine desire to care for you, who have become very dear to us. The picture is that of a woman, nursing and caring for her children. It's the sharing of life.

In the electoral story, I wonder if these things don't feed into the concept of the difference between leadership as power, and leadership as public service. At the very start of the sermon, I made the point that parliament belongs not to the people inside it, but to the people living around it. It's interesting that Paul notes that in his role as apostle, he could make demands of the people, could **require** their cooperation. But he chooses not to do that. If you demand things, require things, then you haven't quite understood the gospel - a message of love, service and sacrifice - with Jesus as the model. How do we recognise good leadership? We recognize it because we have seen it - in Jesus.

Aotearoa New Zealand is not a theocracy. Most people are happy with the separation of church and state. But each one of us, approaching the polling booth, will want to come to our civic responsibility with integrity - with hearts having been searched for the good, and with ears that have listened for the ring of truth. At the end of it all, we won't have elected Jesus - nor even Moses or Joshua. But hopefully we will have measured what we were offered against the fine examples of those who lived in faith, were full of the spirit of wisdom, and served with gentleness and love.

Thirteen days to go! We keep a moment of quiet.

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