

Could Statesmanlike Behaviour Cause One to Be Viewed as Weak?

One Prime Minister, who had recently placed his faith in God, shared that if he told his people of his new-found faith in Jesus Christ and dependence upon God, he would be considered weak. His perception is that the elected leader must be viewed by the electorate as strong in his/her own right and that any expression of dependence on God would be viewed as weakness.

Then, I reflected on two examples that seem to contradict this conclusion.

Upon Sudan's independence in 1956, the southern Sudanese, with their ethnic and religious differences from the majority Sudanese, aspired to form an independent nation of their own. **Joseph Lagu** displayed statesmanlike behaviour while leading an independence movement. One particularly difficult time was in 1971 after government troops had attacked a rebel village in the south, including burning down a church and killing a number of worshippers. Days later while the pain was still strong, a plane carrying northern Sudanese civilians crashed into rebel-held territory, with 29 survivors. Although the temptation was for revenge, Lagu ordered the survivors released. As related by Lagu, his decision resulted from considering the question "What would Christ have me to do?" While reflecting on this question, "his first thought was of Christ feeding the 5,000 when they were in need. His second was of the scriptural admonition concerning the number of times that one should forgive one's enemy — 70 times seven. His last thought was of some advice a chaplain had given him when he was a young man: 'If I ever had a thought in the cool hours of the morning, I should act on it and not dilute it by consulting others. God was talking to me, not them.'" Lagu's decision contributed to the Addis Abbaba settlement of 1972, one of several steps that eventually led to the independence of South Sudan in 2005.

The late President **Levy Mwanawasa** of Zambia provides us with an example of statesmanlike behavior in the way he treated his fiercest critic. Michael Sata was continually critical of the President. His attacks on President were at times very personal. And yet, Sata saw Mwanawasa differently after he personally suffered a serious heart attack. The President intervened to have Sata airlifted to South Africa for treatment, all at Government expense. Sata came to recognize that his differences with Mwanawasa were not personal but simply policy differences. I consider Mwanawasa's action to be statesmanlike because of his work to preserve a dissenting voice. As a result of this action, they reconciled and Sata came to appreciate the President, not necessarily as a policy-maker but as a human. It is likely that Mwanawasa's action saved the life of Sata, who went on to become President himself later.

We have Joseph Lagu not responding in kind to those who had killed several of his people and Levy Mwanawasa using the resources at his disposal as head of government to save the life of his most severe critic. I recognize that there will be those who would consider these two actions as weak. Then, I realized that many of the teachings of Jesus would be viewed as weakness:

Forgive those who hurt you. (paraphrase of Matthew 5:39; 18:21-22)

and

Love your enemy. (Matthew 5:43-44)

Each of these actions displayed by Lagu and Mwanwasa are ones that do not promote us, but rather cause us to humble ourselves before others. I would submit that the one who takes these actions is stronger than the one who takes the action that would place ourselves in the superior position. Statesmanship is about creating healthy societies, and lifting up others. Our willingness to exert servant-leadership is critical.

The issue is about extending grace to others, who are perhaps ignorant of the grace God has extended toward us. As we are reminded:

Indeed, we have all received grace after grace from His fullness. (John 1:16)

When we reflect upon the grace God has extended toward us, we quickly understand that we must be patient with others who are still learning to recognize that truth.

As one friend who has the heart of a statesman pointed out to me, the statesman faces a dilemma when extending grace toward others who have inflicted injustice which could have consequences for those we are called upon to shepherd and protect. This seems to have been an issue that Joseph Lagu faced when he acted. There is often the need for a balance between justice and grace. This is an area where we need wisdom from our Master:

Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without criticizing, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5)

As King David prayed:

Make Your ways known to me, LORD; teach me Your paths. Guide me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; Make Your ways known to me, LORD; teach me Your paths. Guide me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; I wait for You all day long. (Psalm 25:4-5)