Morning Prayer and Spring Convocation
Address by the Rector, 24 March 2003

Over March break we experienced the advent of three new seasons. The first is signaled by the purple liturgical vestments and hangings here in the Chapel. We began the forty day Christian season of Lent—a penitential season, on Ash Wednesday. Second, not long after the beginning of Lent, we began a season of war—a season that has been on our minds, troubling our hearts as the days progress, a season that we hope will be brief. Third, just a couple of days ago, we recognized the beginning of the season of spring; the signs of it are all about us. These three seasons, while seemingly unconnected, have a connection of sorts that I would like to explore with you this morning as a context for something I would like to offer as we begin this new academic term.

For Christians, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, begins with the Imposition of Ashes and the words, “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”—a reminder that we are mortal, a reminder that death awaits us all. This particular Ash Wednesday (a few weeks ago) was a prolepsis or anticipatory of dust and ashes of a different sort—the dust and ashes of war, a grim reminder of our mortality as casualties mount and suffering ensues. Lent as a season ends with death—the death of an innocent man on a cross who preached peace. The war that we are experiencing, like any war, will end with the death of innocent people who desire peace.

Further, Lent is a season of repentance and self-denial, of reflection and introspection, a forty day wandering in the desert, not just in Iraq, but in our hearts. Like Jesus, who was tempted in the desert for forty days, we meet our enemies—enemies within and enemies without; a desert wandering, a desert war. We are called to meet the enemy with faith, obedience, courage, and resolve. We do so in Lent through fasting, through prayer, through meditation, through alms giving, through self-denial in response to the call for a devout and holy life—a life of peace. Calls to a holy life on both sides, have resulted in a holy war—in the desert; this is not new, history is replete with holy wars.

Given these seasons as a backdrop, a context, I want to talk this morning about leadership. Leadership is central to our mission as a school and a part of the St. Paul's School Covenant. Leadership is the second principle of the Covenant—“leadership through service,” servant leadership. I want to talk about a particular leader who embodied servant leadership, a person with many titles and appellations: Son of God, Son of Man, Lamb of God, Savior, Redeemer, Emmanuel, Word Incarnate, the Way, healer, prophet, teacher, brother. I want to talk about Jesus; Jesus as a leader, something we normally don’t discuss, and distinguish the historical Jesus from the Jesus of faith recognizing that finally that distinction is blurred in this man who came among us and preached peace.

At the beginning of his ministry at about the age of thirty, Jesus was called by God to be a leader not of this world but in this world. In announcing a kingdom not of this world but the kingdom of God, he did so by what he said and how he related to others. This thirty year old son of a carpenter from a remote town in an occupied territory caught in the midst of political, economic, and religious struggle led in a way that moved those he touched beyond an awareness of mortality, the mortality of Lent, the mortality of Iraq, moved those and us beyond dust and ashes,
beyond the desert to life immortal, a life eternal as symbolized by the other season that we recognize today—the new life of spring, Easter.

After his call from God and his desert wandering for forty days, Jesus was baptized by John, and then called a group of disciples to follow him. He taught them, he corrected them, he inspired them, he served them, he loved them, he trusted them, and then he empowered them, something that I hope and pray we do here in preparing you as students to be servant leaders.

Jesus also distinguished two motives for leadership. One, “a will to power,” the other “a will to serve.” The reading from Matthew 20: 20-28 says it best given the distinction that came from a question the mother of the sons of Zebedee asked, a mother who wanted power and recognition for her sons. He said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in the kingdom.” She was thinking of a kingdom here on earth as were others who followed Jesus. Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” He was referring to that which awaited him as he set his face resolutely toward Jerusalem and made his way there knowing that he would die. They said (probably unknowingly), “We are able.” Then he said to them prophetically, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

When the other ten disciples heard this, they were understandably upset and they were angry with the two brothers who wanted more—wanted positions of power and authority, special positions—but Jesus called all of them together and made the distinction. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Then Jesus sent the disciples out two by two to proclaim this new kingdom and make incarnate servant leadership. When they came back, they were both elated and confused. In some places, they were welcomed. In other places, they were misunderstood and rejected. As a result, they were troubled by the expectations that the others had of them because those expectations had to do with an earthly kingdom while Jesus called them to proclaim God’s Kingdom.

By worldly standards, Jesus was a failure as a leader. At the end of the season of Lent we remember the great expectations described in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we call Palm Sunday. The people hailed and welcomed him; they wanted a political savior, wanted economic salvation, wanted the restoration of the Golden Age of King David, wanted power, and they thought Jesus would be such a leader. But he heralded another Kingdom—a deeper, more transcendent reality that would call all earthly kingdoms into question; he called for a more radical obedience to God that would result in a life of love with others. The lesson we heard from Philippians 2:5-11 names this reality and the servant leadership required to accomplish it:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human
form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Jesus, by external standards a failure, but by eternal standards a leader who changed the world forever.

His principle of leadership—love. To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and importantly to love your neighbor—neighbors in and around the world—as yourself. Love as a principle of leadership mandating obedience even unto death on a cross. In such obedience Jesus not only became a servant leader but a suffering servant, suffering with all of humanity. A vision for a kingdom that was yet to come, a vision that allowed him to endure the shame and the rejection of the cross.

His style of leadership—empathy. He taught, he lived, he laughed, he cried, he loved his disciples. He taught them in parables and by example and he invited them to go and do likewise.

His method—collaboration, a sharing of the authority of God by empowering others with the gift of the Spirit, a sharing that was profound, and sharing simple things like bread and wine.

My friends, as we experience the season of Lent, the season of War, and the season of Spring, let us be reminded that as citizens of a superpower we are called to lead by serving. Let us remember that as individuals we are called to greatness through such service; service expressed in the Prayer of St. Theresa:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which His compassion will look upon the world; yours are the feet with which He will go about doing good; yours are the hands with which He will bless others now. Amen.