

Sermon – Sunday 14th October 2018 – 6 pm

This last week I have been away in Salisbury for the first module of my MA in Christian Approaches to Leadership. In the light of the question of leadership, this evening's readings present something of the extremes. First we have the Battle of Jericho. Joshua, having apparently been told what to do by God, summons the priests and people, giving them precise instructions about marching around the city for six days. They obey, and on the seventh day, as if in response to their shouts, the walls of the city fall down.

In our second reading, Jesus reproaches those cities where great deeds of power have been done, yet the people have failed to repent, to turn away from their ways and towards God. In the first reading it seems that Joshua's words are heard and followed without a word of dissent, whereas the words – and actions – of Jesus are apparently ignored.

I don't know about you, but I find myself feeling like life would be simpler if we lived in a world like that portrayed in the Old Testament reading. God speaks, Joshua instructs, the people do what they're told. And we can confidently proclaim that God's will has been done. And yet day by day, I find life is just more complicated than that.

One of the interesting things about leadership studies is that it is a young discipline. Although it feels as though the shelves of Waterstones and WH Smith are piled high with books about leadership, most of these sit in the "self help" category rather than being academic studies and are in any case a relatively recent phenomenon. And if writing about leadership hasn't been about for very long, you can imagine that writing about Christian leadership is definitely playing catch-up.

Some Christian writers have been keen to see how writing on leadership and management in the secular – and often specifically business – world can be adapted for use in the church. One of the things that often comes up is the suggestion that we shouldn't dismiss business practices, but that we should always remember that in the church world our primary focus is on God. This makes good sense. There is much to be said about some of what has been discovered to be successful in secular organisations, and we would be foolish either to reinvent the wheel or to assume that just because something is written to assist those whose focus is on making a profit doesn't mean that the findings should be dismissed without a thought.

And yet I still find myself asking questions. The thing is, while it sounds straightforward to adopt business practices that are helpful, while keeping our eyes fixed on God, the truth that I live with, day in and day out, is that keeping my eyes fixed on God is a lifelong journey which I sometimes get wrong. I simply don't have the confidence to say, "God wants us to do this" – not because I don't pray, and not because I don't have ideas, but because I know that I am always in the process of discovering God's will. I'm not there yet – and believe that's the way it is for us humans here on earth.

There is another challenge, too. One of the books I have picked up related to my course is called "Incarnate Leadership". While it is fair to say that none of us is seeking to be Jesus, as his followers we are guided by his leadership. And when we look at the life of Jesus, it presents God's choice to live among us, as one of us, relating to us. While Jesus attracted followers, his life does not present us with an example of an unquestioned leader. Far from it – just listen to the ways the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida were clearly behaving.

And then listen to those extraordinary words: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." It's hard to believe, isn't it, but the words of Jesus transform our expectations. We know what is wise and intelligent, don't we? And yet apparently there are times that we should be listening to the infants. Nothing is as easy as it might seem.

One of the things the leaders of my course keeps saying is that we should not be afraid within the church to realise that we have things to teach the world of business about leadership. Indeed, there are undoubtedly books which seek to help leaders of business to recognise when words of wisdom might be coming from unexpected places – and we might say that Jesus got there ahead of them.

A particular challenge of leadership within the church is that the very identity of those of us who lead – and I would say that's all of us – is that we are followers. And that being followers is our first and most important calling. And if that is the case, there is nothing more important than prayer, worship and connection with God.

And if all of that feels quite difficult then perhaps we need those beautiful words of Jesus encouraging us to lay our troubles on him. Being a follower *is* difficult. But we do it together. We support each other. And we know that we are never alone in our troubles.

Amen