

SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW
AT 8 AND 10AM SERVICES OF HOLY COMMUNION,
24 AUGUST 2008, FEAST OF ST BARTHOLOMEW

Acts 5:12-16; Luke 22:24-30

“... the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.”

If you look through the vacancies pages in the papers you won't see many advertisements for people who want to be servants, but you'll find plenty for people who want to be leaders. And this applies just as much to the appointments pages of the Church Times as to the pages of the Financial Times. It seems we all aspire to be inspirational leaders one way or another these days, whether at work, in Christian ministry, or in our relationships, particularly as parents.

And the self-help literature is full of illustrations from great leaders of the past:

- Xenophon of Athens around 400BC on horseback encouraging his troops into battle with great oratory. He's challenged by a footsoldier to the effect that it was all right for him holding forth up there, while the poor *** infantry struggle along weighed down by shield and sword. Rather than have the man killed for insubordination, Xenophon dismounts, takes a shield and now, with this and his cavalry armour carrying more weight than any infantryman, he leads the charge.
- And then there's Alexander the Great, an unbelievable military success, sweeping across vast swathes of Europe, the Middle East and Asia around 320BC, achieving it all through the fantastic loyalty he inspired in his soldiers. Stories of his involvement in the thick of battle abound. One day his army is struggling across an arid plain in Asia Minor desperate for water. A scouting party is sent out and returns with a helmet full of water, just enough to refresh their chief. Alexander thanks them and pours it on the ground. If his men can't drink, he won't.

Let's think about some more recent great leaders. Start with some Brits: Churchill, Thatcher. But not all great leaders are goodies. Think about some bad guys: Hitler, Stalin, Chairman Mao. And it's not all about economics and warfare. Think about some people we see as moral leaders: Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela.

What do these people have in common? Why do we think of them as great leaders? What about the style of leadership Jesus shows us? And crucially, what does this say to each of us in our leadership at work, in ministry, or in our relationships, not least as parents or grandparents?

Well it seems to me that we might usefully think about this in three dimensions:

- Setting a vision.
- Getting alongside people.
- And bringing out the best in people.

Think about Moses:

- Imagining the Promised Land.

- Travelling with the people for those forty years, sharing their suffering.
- And then, delegating, finding his successor who can complete his work when he's no longer around.

It's a bit like the picture of the shepherd that appears so often in the Bible. Identifying pastures new, walking with the flock, encouraging the strong, and chivvying the ones who fall behind.

So let's think about this **vision** thing. A vision may, of course, be totally misguided – the victory of Hitler's fictional Aryan master race. It may be driven by external realities – Thatcher's 'there is no alternative' (remember 'TINA'?). Or it may be a dream – remember Martin Luther King's final speech at the Lincoln Memorial – the dream of "that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!'" The dream ... the dream that for us is called the Kingdom of God – a dream that may not be realised in this world, but for which we must always strive.

The dream, the vision, but then there's **getting alongside people**, getting alongside them as individuals. Remember Xenophon and Alexander, with their troops. Napoleon claimed to know every officer in his Grande Armée. Remember Mahatma Gandhi spinning thread to show how even the poorest untouchable villager could be self sufficient. Remember Jesus in the press of the crowd getting close to the woman with the haemorrhage, and giving her his healing power. Remember our Pastoral Care Team, and many members of this congregation, sitting with those who are sick or mourn and sharing their grief.

The vision, getting close to people, and finally there's **bringing out the best** in others. Imagine the joy of a teacher who has just seen her pupils achieve the grades they deserve and now in bittersweet emotion bids them farewell to work or to college. Share the joy of the parent who sees their child, now an adult, building their own life, not in slavish imitation of Mum and Dad, but as a mature person able to make their own decisions for good or ill. Think of Jesus, only three years ministry and teaching, but that was enough. At the end it's time to move on – the presence on the Emmaus Road for those two disciples, the fleeting moment in and out of time for us at the altar rail or in prayer, but then we live our own lives, we're allowed to grow up – with that vision of the Kingdom, sustained by the Holy Spirit, but allowed our glorious liberty of children of God.

And in essence all these aspects of leadership (creating the vision, being alongside, bringing out the best) are about service. Not focussed on the leader, but focussed on the led. Today we celebrate St Bartholomew, and for the preacher that's quite a challenge, because we only know one thing about Bartholomew for sure – but that one thing is all that matters, because all we know is that he was a disciple, an Apostle. Apart from that, Bartholomew fades into legend. And that's ok, because to serve is not to shine; it's to hide. Bartholomew and all those other hidden saints, in this congregation and elsewhere, point to Jesus, and Jesus points us to the Kingdom of the Father. And that's real leadership.

Amen