

FOUNDERS DAY SERVICE ST PETER'S COLLEGE OXFORD 23RD JUNE

On the occasion of the retirement of the Master Mark Damazer

I'm honoured as a former Visitor to the College to preach at this special Founders Day Service when we mark the outstanding contribution that the Master has made to the College and to the University. But it's not my calling to utter the paeans of praise that he merits. That is for those who have laboured and learned with him. It's my job to light upon some aspect of his tenure and offer some theological reflection.

As I've listened to others pay tribute to him one of the qualities that stands out is the character of his leadership. That is the subject that I've chosen. It's fitting for Founders Day for it was the gift of leadership that Bishop Frank Chavasse exercised when he founded this College together with Wycliffe Hall. But I don't want to dwell on the past. Rather I'd like to root the subject in the present for everywhere you turn you hear lamentations about the absence of leadership in our world.

For some time and without any success I've been touting a programme idea for Radio 4 (since your time, Master!). It's called 'Margins of Error'. The presenter goes to the bookshelves of influential people and examines books they read decades previously to see where they turned the page or underlined or made marks of question or exclamation! The interviewer then explores why, and whether they have changed their mind and why. I did this myself the other day and took down 'Authority, Leadership and Conflict in the Church' by Paul Avis. I read it 25 years ago. It was a fascinating exercise to see where I had marked it and to discover just how influential it's been in my own life and work. There's a chapter that begins by quoting Shakespeare and an exchange between Kent and King Lear.

LEAR: What wouldst thou?

KENT: Service.

LEAR: Whom wouldst thou serve?

KENT: You.

LEAR: Dost thou know me fellow?

KENT: No, sir; but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master.

LEAR: What's that?

KENT: Authority.

This intuitive identification of the quality of leadership resembles episodes in the life of Christ when it's recorded in the Gospels that even his enemies recognised that Jesus acted with extraordinary authority. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Matthew records that the crowds were 'astounded at his teaching for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes' (7:28) . And in John's Gospel the police sent to spy on Jesus report 'never has anyone spoken like this' (7:46).

And further on in the Gospel of John we're given the most vivid exposition of leadership when Jesus is to be found on his hands and knees washing the feet of his disciples.

But not everybody is comfortable talking about leadership. I had a colleague who knew well the history, the culture and the Church of Germany who would always bristle at the use of the word that translated as 'Führer'. And another colleague who was asked to write a report on the future of the Church of England was told to drop a proposed chapter on leadership because it smacked of elitism!

But the leadership modelled by Jesus is anything but elitist. It's not about dominance or exploitation. It is not about privilege and prizes. It's captured in this scene of him kneeling before those he came to lead. Yet Jesus was unashamedly a leader. His very last words to St Peter after whom this House is founded were 'Follow me'.

I once asked a Management Consultant to give me a definition of leadership. She thought for only a moment and said, 'Followership!'. The one thing that defines a leader is that they have a following.

But there is a remarkable aspect to this image of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. This is the only time in the Gospels, indeed it may have been the only time in his life, when Jesus ever calls himself 'Lord'.

"You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am."

He shares this revelation of himself not when stilling the storm on the Sea of Galilee or when raising Lazarus from the dead but when on his hands and knees doing the job of a servant, removing the dirt from travel-weary feet. Here's the leader who serves, the servant who leads. In Christian theology what is truly remarkable is that Jesus reveals not just a servant leader but a servant God. The Deacon God. The God who serves.

I was once asked to give a talk on leadership and identified ten characteristics. And because I went to Theological College – Wycliffe Hall as it happened- they all began with the same letter! 'L'.

The leader as Listener and Learner, the leader who is Loyal to those who follow, the leader that sees themselves as Least and Last, the leader who is unafraid to Love and Looks for the best in others, the leader who knows the cost of being a Loner, the leader who Liberates and the leader around whom others are not afraid to Laugh.

That last one is probably the most telling. If you want to identify a nervous leader then there is never any laughter around the insecure leader for everyone is walking on eggshells, too frightened to upset the leader who wants others only to assent to his own schemes.

But it is the learning leader who gives the most space to others to contribute their own ideas. There's a cartoon of a bishop doing a Confirmation Service. The scene is drawn from behind the candidate who's kneeling before the bishop. Pinned to his back is an 'L' Plate making the nice point that the candidate is a learner, which is what the word disciple means, and that the confirmation candidate is at the beginning of a journey, not its end. But the really nice touch is that if you look closely at the bishop's mitre woven into it is another 'L'. Both learners. But in one parish they had plagiarised and photocopied the cartoon and air brushed the 'L' out of the bishop's mitre! What on earth did that say about leaders? That once you became a leader you stopped learning! Sadly that is true of some.

I remember my history teacher telling us all that the moment you stopped reading your subject you should stop teaching it. It's that life-long learning that not only keeps the mind active but the soul humble as you continually refine your own understanding through the insights of others. It is the sort of leadership that gives space to others to shape your thinking and to enrich your own knowledge.

There are some, of course, even in the church who would equate leadership with command and control. Church leaders who think that to arrest the decline in numbers we must dictate strategies from the top downwards. Not only does that contradict the model of leadership exemplified by Christ there is no evidence that it reverses the falling membership.

Then, of course, there is the weariness about the quality of leadership in public life, from the political arena to that of academia, and in our professions such as the police and medicine.

In today's world many assert that private life can be divorced from public office. I'm not convinced. An invitation to vote for someone is an invitation to trust them. If a person has been found to have betrayed those closest to them how can you be sure he will not

betray those at a distance? Trustworthiness is a legitimate issue for those who hold public office either by election or by appointment.

Although many professions are generally described as public service the widespread feeling is that too many are self-serving. For them service is not an end in itself, but a means of ultimately serving your own interests through big salaries, generous expenses and large pensions. This has left ordinary people losing confidence in those who lead us.

And this brings me back to the sight of Jesus kneeling in front of his disciples. They were there to learn. He was there to show them an example of leadership. 'Do you know what I have done to you?' he asked deliberately and pointedly.

'If I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet so you ought to wash one another's feet.'

That's the servant leader.

Some Christians seem to think that Jesus came to earth and became a servant so that he could secure his domination over the world before resuming his place in Heaven as Lord of Lords and King of Kings. In other words, his service was a means to an end.

But the truth is that Jesus returns to his place in Heaven as the Lamb upon the Throne. The Throne the symbol of Leadership and the Lamb the symbol of Service. Jesus is forever a servant. Not as a means to an end.

That's the inspiration for the service of a leader. Service as an end in itself. For service is to be the very character of the leader.

In Ramachandra Guha's latest biography of Mahatma Gandhi called 'The Years that Changed the World 1914 – 1948' he records fascinating episodes when Mahatma, meaning Great Soul, comes to London and meets many famous people such as Albert Einstein.

There's also a meeting, unlikely though it may seem, between Mahatma Gandhi and Charlie Chaplin. Afterwards there was a newspaper editorial called 'Mahatma and the Clown' which observed that between them they had 'both established contact with larger numbers of their fellow human beings than, probably, anyone else in history.' The editorial went on to ask what they had in common. The answer? 'Perhaps, more than anything' the newspaper explained, 'a capacity to sympathise and to understand mass emotions.' I think the word today would be 'empathy'.

That was certainly the quality that marked out Jesus. The Gospels tell us that when he saw the crowds following him he felt that they were like sheep without a shepherd, people without a leader, and he had compassion on them – more than sympathy, he had empathy.

And therein lay his authority.

In the current concerns about student life and mental well-being universities are being challenged to demonstrate greater empathy.

What is clear from all that I have heard about the Master's tenure is that his own authority has been rooted in a practical empathy for both students and colleagues.

But let the last word on leadership go to the author of the editorial quoted by Ramachandra Guha in his story about Gandhi and Chaplin which I will allow you to interpret and apply in whichever way you wish to the present contest to become our national leader and Prime Minister.

'Some people make us laugh and some people make us follow them; clowns and mahatmas'!

Amen!

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE

23rd June 2019 Petertide

