

KINGS COLLEGE CHAPEL 21ST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

To worship with you today is a blessing to me, for apart from the Lords's Prayer the one that I've prayed most often in my life is that of your Founder Henry V1.

'O Lord Jesus Christ, who hast created and redeemed me and hast brought me unto that which now I am, Thou knowest what Thou wouldst do with me; do with me according to Thy will for Thy tender mercy's sake.'

It is a prayer for every stage of our life and it is a prayer for all who are called to leadership which is one of the major themes of our Gospel today.

One of the many touching moments of the Coronation last year was at the beginning of the Service when King Charles was received into the Abbey by a young person who said:

'Your Majesty, as children of the Kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of kings,'

And The King replied,

'In his name and after his example I come not to be served but to serve.'

This call to service which the King quoted comes directly from today's Gospel. And I imagine that many of you here today are called to some form of leadership. It is a noble calling, but as this episode from the life of the first disciples makes abundantly clear, it is a calling fraught with temptations and often mired in vanity, ambition, pain, jealousy and strife – and that's just the Church! Nevertheless such challenges should not stop you from hearing and obeying the call to leadership and service.

When I was in Liverpool we built one of the very first City Academies. We went in search of a new Principal to lead this ground-breaking school.

At the top of the list of the qualities that we were looking for was that the Head Teacher should be the Lead Learner in the Academy. God save us from leaders who think that they have arrived and have nothing more to learn!

A learning leader does two things – they create a culture of humility and space for others to make and contribute their own discoveries.

I once wrote a little book for young people getting confirmed which was illustrated with various cartoons. In one a candidate is seen kneeling in front of the bishop and on to his back is pinned an 'L' plate, making the nice point that being a disciple is not about arriving but about learning, learning Christ. But the even nicer point is that if you look more closely you see that an 'L' plate has been woven into the bishop's mitre, making the even nicer point that as a leader you never stop learning. These cartoons are often plagiarised and copied. In one parish they had air-brushed the 'L' plate out of the mitre!

It's often a feature of an insecure leader that they seek to impose not just their views but their style and personality upon the team. And if you want to know the tell tale sign of such insecurity there is never any laughter in the presence of such a leader except a nervous one!

By contrast the leader determined to serve others after the example of Christ allows a freedom within the group even to disagree, even fiercely, as we witness in this story. The seriousness of their mission is balanced by a humanity evidenced in humour. We often lose sight of the comedy in Jesus' parables – the hypocrite judging others with a huge plank jutting out of his eye; the hapless and impossible debtor owing five times the national budget! Yes, there are tears to be shed in following Jesus but there is laughter too. The leader knows both.

Shortly after arriving in Liverpool I was preaching at an evening service in which I said that if they had come to hear the new bishop they might well be disappointed; but that if they had come in the hope that God might speak to them well At the end of the service as I stood at the door I could see someone holding back.

After every one had gone, out of the shadows stepped Ken Dodd. (I have his widow's permission to tell this story). He grasped my hand and said, "I came into church this evening, knelt down and begged, 'O God speak to me, O God speak to me'. He then added, 'When you stood up and said what you did if angels has appeared I would have believed it.'

Subsequently I asked Ken to address a meeting of church leaders from Glasgow, Belfast and Liverpool on Faith and Humour. After talking about the rainbow of laughter he said that there was a similarity between being a comedian and being a priest. Both were observers of life. He paused. And both are very lonely professions. You could have heard a feather fall.

Priests and other leaders experience an aloneness because as a leader you sometimes have to make decisions based on confidential information that nobody else can have. Others can become hostile and even resent your leadership.

The dynamic of servant leadership demonstrated by Jesus is summed up in what is known as the doctrine of self-giving which points up the times when Jesus gave of himself generously especially, of course, on the Cross. But this can be much exaggerated. Indeed, it can be dangerous.

Theologians point to Jesus on his knees washing the feet of his disciples as the model of self-giving. Moreover, he explicitly states that he has washed their feet as an example for them to follow.

But what is overlooked is that in the previous chapter it is Jesus who is having his own feet washed, and when they try to shoo away the woman Jesus is very stern and tells them to leave her alone. What is also overlooked is the precise nature of the example. Jesus did NOT say that it was to wash the feet of other people. Rather, he said the example was of washing each other's' feet. In other words, the call is to mutual service, of giving and receiving.

Too often service and ministry are conceived as being unilateral and it is no wonder that people burn out. Christian service is meant to be mutual; and that includes leaders into whose lives much should flow to refresh them.

So those called to lead must be learners, unperturbed by laughter and unafraid to be loners.

For such a calling there is no finer prayer:

“O Lord Jesus Christ, who hast created and redeemed me and hast bought me unto that which now I am, Thou knowest what Thou wouldst do with me; do with me according to Thy will for Thy tender mercy's sake. Amen “

The Right Reverend Bishop James Jones KBE

October 20th 2024

The Twenty First Sunday after Trinity

