

HOMILY 24-11-19

What do you think makes a good leader? Or, to express the question another way, what abilities and qualities do you look for and expect in leadership? I think the abilities are often easier to identify than the qualities which are less tangible! But, to prime the pump for our thinking let me offer a personal response. I look for someone with a high level of competence, a desire to learn, and a willingness to work hard; someone who can think strategically, work collaboratively, and articulate things well; even someone encourages and enables the people around them to be their best selves. I hope also to find in a leader integrity, compassion, wisdom, humility, creativity, generosity... and a sense of humour!

This is not a comprehensive list, and I wonder what additional abilities and qualities you hope for and expect in a leader?

In case you're feeling anxious that I will now go on to deliver a thoughtful reflection on the top ten elements of effective leadership according to Harvard Business School research - be at peace!

On this last day of the Church calendar we remember Jesus as Christ, and king. Indeed, it's called Christ the King Sunday! Royalty is a very old expression of inherited community leadership, and when we look back at history we find rulers who were wise and just, and some who were the antithesis of these. The queens and kings of history generally had armies which they used to defend and expand their territory, together with significant wealth, authority, and power.

The English politician', John Dalberg-Acton, suggested in an 1887 letter that, 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Before continuing, 'Great men, are almost always bad men...'

Bearing these things in mind then, what do we mean when we say, 'Christ the King'? Further, because of many unjust experiences of Kingship in human history... is this language helpful? In some ways we cannot escape it because the phrase 'Kingdom of God' is found often in the New Testament, and every kingdom has a king... so surely Jesus, who we believe was the fulfilment of Jewish Messianic prophecy... is that King?

When we remember the way that Jesus is described in the Gospels it would certainly seem that he had the leadership qualities I've previously articulated: in his response to those rejected by his religion he was compassionate; in his response to legal questioning he was consistently wise; in his healing of the sick and story-telling he was creative; in his choice to wash the feet of his disciples he demonstrated humility; and in calling Peter to step out of the boat and walk on water... I think he evidenced a sense of humour!

But, in the Gospel reading set for today we are not invited to remember one of the joy-filled encounters between Jesus and people after resurrection, instead we are taken straight to Luke's account of his crucifixion. It is a reading we might think of as a Good Friday text - but there are at least two qualities of leadership demonstrated in the account. Earlier in his teaching ministry Jesus had affirmed that we are to love our enemies and pray for those persecute us (Matthew 5:44). In today's Gospel after Jesus had been nailed to a cross and was dying a painful death, Luke remembers Jesus saying, "Father, forgive them; for they don't know what they are doing." There is great integrity in this, because he practiced what he taught. Jesus did not ask those who follow him

to do tough things, without doing them himself... even when the circumstances were extreme.

Subsequently, Jesus was mocked by the crowd about his authority and identity, but he was not provoked by their unkindness to offer harsh words in reply. Something for all of us to think about I reckon!

Then, in a last act of generosity, Jesus assured a dying thief that he would be taken care of, with the words, 'this day you will be with me in Paradise.' (Luke 23:43). Not, later you will be with me in Paradise! Not, after you've been baptised you'll be with me in Paradise! But, 'this day' ... present tense, right here and now... 'you will be with me in Paradise'.

My confession is that I am more comfortable thinking about Jesus as a friend and a brother; a companion and shepherd; a light in times of darkness, and my hope when everything seems hopeless. I also embrace the term 'saviour' which ties in much of what has been previously described.

But, the terms 'Lord' and 'King' jar because human expressions of Lordship and Kingship have so often been associated with the exploitation of others, and different forms of injustice. The term 'leader' is not strong enough - while the stronger title of 'supreme leader' has other unhelpful associations.

So, back to 'Lord' and 'King'. We use these powerful titles in our prayers and hymns, but what do we mean by them? I reckon authority is part of it. God has authority in my life, and yours. Jesus has authority in my life, and yours. It is not forced upon us, but rather we choose to accept it, and we choose to accept it because through this authority our lives somehow make more sense... become more complete, and whole.

More than this we might also affirm that the authority of Jesus is trustworthy, life-giving, and central to our way of being.

What do you reckon?

Let's pray...

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of language and for the opportunity to think about how we name you in our lives, and in the life of creation. It's hard to express mystery and intangible things, and we give thanks for inspiring those who work to do this. We particularly give thanks for Jesus our Lord and Servant King; and for the life-giving authority he offers each day. Amen