

## **Jesus as Leader**

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> August 2011**

**6.00pm - Marston Methodist Church**

*Exodus 3.1-15 Matthew 16.21-28*

One of the concerns of our age is the development of leadership studies. Each workplace seems to have them. There are various programmes available for rural leadership, indigenous leadership, company leadership, community leadership. This events at Westminster earlier this summer, our media has decided it needs to focus on political and business leadership. There is a vast body of leadership theory: you can have charismatic leaders, servant leaders or transformational leaders. It is an industry, perhaps a useful one – for who can deny the importance of leaders?

Before any of this came into exists, however, there was a Biblical tradition of leadership. Some writers have gone so far as to mine the Bible for handy hints for today's leaders. (My favourite title is 'Jesus CEO' by Laurie Beth Jones – the title says it all). But Biblical leadership, if you look at it closely, is very different to modern approaches.

At the very beginning of Israel's consciousness of itself as the people of God stands the call of Moses. The encounter with God in the burning bush is a crystalising event in the emergence of a pattern of leadership amongst the people of God. Moses was to become the great leader of Israel, the one who would lead them out of slavery and to the edge of the promised land, the one through whom the Torah, the law, would be given. The shadow of Moses was cast over every leader that followed, and his example is the dominant model of leadership for Israel.

The dialogue with God opens with the primary affirmation that undergirds and informs all prophetic and Biblical leadership: God has heard the cry of his people! Before any human being dawdles onto the stage, tending his sheep, or rolling up for another day at the office, God is acutely aware of the suffering of human beings. God observes the misery of his people, he hears their cry and he decides to deliver. That is the premise of Biblical leadership. Every leader that arises throughout the Bible and throughout the history of the church, is only the second act in the drama: God has already observed the suffering, heard

the cry and decided to act. God's concern, God's love, God's attention to human suffering is always primary.

What follows God's decision to act is a call to some human being – in this case a wandering shepherd hiding in Midian from a murder he committed in Egypt the land of his birth. Having decided to act, to work towards deliverance for those who are suffering, God calls a man or woman to give effect to his purpose. Throughout the OT we have story after story of people who are called by God to a task: "Go to Pharaoh and say ...". "Lead my people out of Egypt ..." "Go and pronounce the word of the Lord to the King, to the Emperor, to the People!"

At the heart of all spiritual leadership is this mystery of God's call. It is not always welcome! The human being who receives this message is often reluctant to take it up. Moses said "I'm not a good speaker". Amos said "I'm just a simple farmer." Jeremiah grumbled and complained. Jonah simply ran away. Throughout the Old Testament a litany of excuses and avoidance is offered in response to God's call. But this is answered by divine insistence, and the promise of grace and strength and wisdom.

The business of God calling people to do his work has various consequences. No spiritual leader in the Biblical tradition does this work in her own authority. It is always God who calls and commissions. It is God's work, God's action, God's mission that comprises their activity. It does not draw on human capacities or power but is a channel for the purposes and the power of God. Because of this, it has astonishing results, often confounding reasonable human expectations and delivering strange and mysterious outcomes.

The third and final element of this structure of God's action is the disclosure of the name of the One who calls to Moses. Moses has the temerity to ask this divine Presence what is your name? And the answer is one of the great truths of the Jewish and Christian traditions: God says "I am who I am". Other interpreters have "I will be who I will be"). You will say to the Israelites "I am" has sent me to you'.

This mysterious name of God expresses the sovereign freedom of the Lord. Naming things is a way of controlling them, of managing them. Some native cultures believe that if you

know the name of someone you can control their spirit, so the true name is guarded as a dangerous secret. To know the name of the Gods is to be able to invoke their presence or their aid. To know the name is to have authority in the eyes of the people, to know something of the secret and the power of God. In response to Moses' question God's answer is deeply ironic: "this is my name forever and this is my title for all generations – "I will be what I will be". In other words "I am beyond your control, your titles, your theologies, your plans, all your attempts to domesticate and control me. I am sovereign, unconstrained freedom and you will not pin me down!"

Here is the structure of Biblical leadership – it starts with a God who hears, who cares and who decides to act. It issues in a call to some unwitting human being, who receives a divine commission to preach or to lead or to act for transformation of the situation God has noticed. Finally Biblical leadership always is exercised under the sovereign freedom of the Lord God – it recognises that God is always bigger than our interpretations, our agendas, our mixed motivations and limited ideas of his justice, his love and his purpose.

The people of Jesus' time were used to this pattern of leadership and they thought they understood it. They knew that God was the only one who could save them, that God raised up leaders and that God's unfettered power was stronger than all the world's Empires. So the various ragged preachers who arose and announced that God had called them to set Israel free from Roman oppression were taken quite seriously. People believed they could do it and flocked to the cause. This particular style of leader was called a Messiah. We now know there were many Messianic movements in the years before Jesus.

This is a pattern we can still see: a figure like Moqtada el Sadr in Iraq today fits the pattern pretty well – a revolutionary preacher who rises up against an occupying Empire in the name of his god. We can see that some at least in the group around Jesus were thinking just this way – in John 6 we are told that "Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king" so he withdrew to the mountain by himself.

In our Gospel today from Matthew chapter 16 Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is. Peter answers "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God". You are the deliverer, a leader in the mould of Moses who would lead his people triumphantly to victory and throw off the Roman yoke of colonial oppression.

Jesus accepts Peter's declaration (in Matthew's Gospel in glowing terms – leading some to interpret Peter as the first in a line of pre-eminent leaders of the church). But in affirming the title, he goes on to radically redefine what this Messiahship will mean. It is a leadership, modeled not on military or political victory but on suffering at the hands of human authorities, death, and, on the third day, "being raised". Nowhere in Israel's experience of leadership is this ever found (except perhaps in the Servant Songs of Isaiah). The shape of Jesus' leadership has a fundamentally different trajectory to anything known before.

Furthermore, this strange leadership which will somehow bring deliverance, is not exercised just by one magnificent, charismatic leader. The call of Jesus is extended to all who would be his disciples, and the path of suffering and the Cross is for all his disciples, not just the leader. This is at the heart of the gospel message. In Mark's Gospel this passage is literally right at the centre of the story of Jesus – it is the great turning point, the heart of the gospel! It is so counter-intuitive, so hard to understand that Jesus takes the rest of the Mark's gospel trying to help them understand.

I think there is little doubt that the church today struggles with this as much as Peter and the first disciples. We find a leader who suffers and who is destined to die very difficult. And when we finally come to accept that the leadership of Jesus might work this way, we recoil from making it a general principle of the Christian community. We can accept a suffering Saviour, but we want to make him 'special' – a 'one-off' case that is effective for all people. Is Jesus in his life and death a special case, or the model for all redeemed humanity?

This great question is beautifully posed in one of the great theological texts of our time, the film *The Life of Brian*. This Monty Python masterpiece portrays many of the great theological questions that we must answer. At one point the hapless Brian, mistaken by the earnest crowds for their Messiah, is running away from the hysterical mob. As he runs he loses a sandal, and leaves it in the dirt. The crowd rush up and stop before the sandal of their Messiah. And then they argue: one group says 'this is the Holy Sandal of Brian – it is an object of devotion, a sign he has given us.' "No", says the other group, "It means we must all take off our left sandals and evermore walk with only one shoe". In the resulting theological dispute, Brian makes his escape!

Is the Cross a special sign, a one-off event, in the history of humanity, or is it a type, a model, of what it means to love and live faithfully as a disciple of Jesus? A related question is whether Jesus remains an exalted leader, separated from his followers by his special status at the right hand of God, or whether his mission has been passed on to us and we are now his colleagues, fellow-servants in the great project of the kingdom of God. Over the history of the Christian church some have answered that the Cross is special and unique, and Jesus is an exalted leader very different from us, others have seen the Cross as a reality shared between Jesus and his followers and have emphasized a comradeship, a brotherhood, with Jesus.

The fullness of Christian experience would say it is both/and, but the first sense often overwhelms the second, and if this is the case Christian discipleship is rendered shallow and powerless.

One thing I have found in my leadership work is what I called 'umbrella leadership' – where leaders (usually in high stress or dysfunctional corporate environments) see their job as protecting their followers from the fallout, the toxic mood and vindictive acts that are a part of the corporate culture. The leader protects others, often at great personal cost, from what's going around. In some views of Jesus, this is exactly what he does – he protects us from the consequences of sin, from bad things happening, from the vindictiveness of a cynical world. This tends to correlate with 'the Jesus is a unique leader, the Cross is a unique event' theology. Pastorally, this view can encounter difficulty when bad things do happen to people, when opposition comes, when tragedy strikes.

It also doesn't square with the words of Jesus: "if anyone wants to be my disciple let them deny themselves, take up their Cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will find it". Far from being an 'umbrella leader' Jesus invites his followers into the hurly burly of the fray, into the difficult path where we should expect suffering and opposition and even death. In one saying near the end of his ministry Jesus says to his disciples: "I do not call you servants any longer – I call you my friends". The leadership of Jesus merges into friendship, into the comradeship of a shared mission.

This is not just a stoical 'putting up with things' or worse, a masochistic love of suffering. Jesus promises this is the way to fullness of life, this is the path to healing and wholeness. God in sovereign freedom chooses this way to bring his deliverance. In the raising of Christ, the mystery of Resurrection, God's purpose of deliverance is achieved in strange and unexpected ways. And this is true not just for Jesus, but also for his followers. Paul said "If we share in a death like his we shall share in a Resurrection like his" – we will find our way strangely healed and empowered even in suffering and failure.

People who understand the call of Jesus this way, find themselves empowered to meet and deal with all manner of difficulties and crises. The astonishing thing about accepting Jesus as a leader who hands on his mission and his way of being in the world, is that we discover him strangely and miraculously beside us as we tread the road. He is present in our crises and our suffering. He walks beside us on life's way.

When we discover that, we paradoxically know that the Cross is unique, a powerful cosmic event at the centre of human history. We know that Jesus is the exalted Lord close to the being of God. We know that it is 'both/and': the leadership of Jesus equips us to walk in his way and to carry on his work, but he is also God incarnate, and the Cross and Resurrection is the great 'tipping point' of human history.

The leadership of Jesus invites us all into his mission. And what is that mission? It is the continuing expression of Biblical leadership! It announces that God has witnessed the plight of humankind and acted in Jesus to initiate the Kingdom of God! It calls women and men everywhere to become part of the community called 'church' - the living embodiment of the risen Jesus that acts for justice and witnesses to the kingdom. It recalls and proclaims that God will be who God will be, working in unusual and confusing ways, bringing healing out of suffering, wholeness in brokenness and even life out of death!

Our call is Lead us on, O Risen Lord, and give us grace to follow!