

**A sermon preached by Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of  
Coventry on Maundy Thursday at the Chrism Eucharist in  
Coventry Cathedral (2<sup>nd</sup> April 2015)**

**Readings: 1 Samuel 16.1-13a; Luke 22.24-30**

**Talk about leadership . . .**

There's been a lot of talk about leadership in the Church recently. A high-powered report on identifying and training so called, 'senior leadership' in the Church was given a hammering in the *Church Times*, not entirely fairly in my view. I've had a hand in another report – the one by the Faith and Order Commission – on the same subject. There we recognised that describing the Church's ministry in terms of leadership is not everyone's cup of tea. We also admit that 'leader' is not the primary term for a Christian minister in the Church's tradition or, even, in scripture itself. But we also said that there is, nevertheless, a good deal of leadership exercised in the Bible by those called into positions of responsibility in the people of God – and that those people are sometimes explicitly called leaders. We took the view that leadership is a human phenomenon: it is a reality that happens in human communities and is necessary for their life and order. We said that what is needed is a 'critical appropriation' of language of leadership so that it properly serves the gospel.

**But not so with you . . .**

That's the method Jesus seems to employ with the disciples in our gospel reading – a reading about leadership and that one that uses the 'L' word dreaded by some. Jesus describes the sort of leaders, and exercise of leadership, that he observes in the world and says, '*but not so with you*'. Then he goes on to define the sort of leadership the apostles are to show, and the sort of leaders they are to be.

I was recently speaking to a very senior and highly influential person in the business world who has exercised extraordinary leadership in business and academia, upon which very many thousands of jobs have depended over the years and through which great prosperity has come to the nation. We were talking about what makes for good leadership and what gets in the way of it. He said something along the lines of, 'the problem with so many good leaders is that their egos get in the way'.

That's what was happening with the disciples. Their egos were getting in the way: v.24 – 'A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest'. They were suffering from that which the philosopher Alain de Botton describes in a recent book as 'status-anxiety'. They were anxious about their status in the kingdom of God and were vying for the highest recognition.

The thing about Jesus is that he often takes us at our word but then speaks his word into it. If you want to talk about greatness he says, then that's fine, but you need to realise that in the kingdom of God greatness is defined in this way: 'the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves'. And then, a little later, he seals the argument with an indisputable point, one that will soon be written in blood, his own blood: 'I am among you as one who serves'.

The commentary I've been reading says that just as Jesus' leadership as Lord and King (and what greater leader can there be?) is expressed in the 'shape of service . . . so also must it be the defining quality of the apostles – who, then, are to turn from their obsession with their own status to a comparable attentiveness to the needs of others'.

I've been giving some thought to what makes for healthy church communities and how we, as pastors, can help to shape and form the portion of the church over which we are given responsibility. I've been helped some words of Dan Hardy, a brilliant Anglican theologian who is sadly no longer with us. He wrote, 'It is perhaps central to our ecclesiology: when a pilgrim's openness to the Spirit is met by the Spirit and "other" replaces self as the object of attraction'.

When the 'other replaces self as the object of attraction' we know that the Spirit is really, powerfully, transformatively at work. That's how we got into the faith, isn't it? When we found ourselves so attracted by the person of Jesus that we wanted to live for him. That's how we got into Christian ministry, isn't it? When we were compelled to love Christ's people and the people Christ wanted to reach with his love. That's when we see fruit in our ministry, isn't it? When we care less about ourselves, our money, our possessions, our position, our

reputation, our status than we do about someone else and their steps into fullness of life.

### **God looking on the heart**

We know from our own experience – the experience of the grace of God in salvation, the call of God into ministry, the mercy of God that we see daily in our encounters with people – the truth of what Samuel discovered powerfully and wonderfully when he was trying to discern the leader that God had chosen that ‘the Lord does not see as mortals see: they look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’.

Thank God that God looks on the heart and not on the appearance of our bodies or minds or even our moral history. God looks on the heart. God has looked on your heart and my heart and sees that despite all our failings and inadequacies there is a heart that he can work with, a heart that is open to God, a heart that God’s Spirit can heal, a heart that Jesus can breathe into so that it pulsates with divine love.

### **Keeping hearts healthy**

But how, my dear brothers and sisters in the ministry that we share, can we keep our hearts soft and not let them harden through the pressures of life and rigours of ministry? How do we keep our hearts open to the life of God and not allow them to become closed in on themselves? How do we keep our hearts pulsating with the love of God so that we remain fully alive in God so that God’s life flows in us and from us? How do we, my friends, in the words found in the ordination services of deacons and priests have ‘our hearts daily enlarged’?

The ordination services themselves give us two answers that apply to any form of Christian service and ministry in the life of the Church.

The first might be called ‘the practices of spiritual discipline’.

Prospective deacons and priests are summoned by the bishop to ‘*pray*, therefore, that your hearts may be daily enlarged and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened’.

There's much more that could be said about spiritual disciplines but it's very interesting that the ordinations of all three orders boil them down to three things:

'Be diligent in prayer, in reading the Holy Scriptures, and in all studies that will deepen your faith and fit you to bear witness to the truth of the gospel'.

As well as the practices of spiritual discipline the ordination services also commend 'a perspective on the status of the Church – not our status in the Church – but the status of the Church as the bride and body and people of Christ:

Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ's own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross.

And as you keep your understanding of the Church set on this perspective, remember also that because it is Christ who has entrusted you with his beloved and beautified bride, with his sacred body on which he relies to do his work, it is, as the Ordinal puts it, 'to him that you will render account for stewardship of his people'. Keep that ultimate perspective in your mind and heart in your ministry

But always, by way of perspective, even when you are driven to your knees by the enormity of your calling and by the inadequacy of your own strength and power (actually, especially when you driven to your knees), know that God is always, *always*, ready to give you his 'grace and power'.

So *pray earnestly for the Holy Spirit* – the fundamental practice of Christian life: praying for God's Holy Spirit.

## **Our status as sinners for whom Christ died**

The ordination service of bishops calls them 'to grow into Christ's likeness that we may sanctify the lives of all with whom we have to do?' It is a calling that belongs to every sphere of Christian ministry because Jesus is the true Reader, the true Deacon, the true Priest, the true Bishop, the most ministerially active member of the body of which he is the head: and as his ministers we are to be like him.

That is why we gather on this day of this week to renew our vows of ministry: so that we can see ourselves and our calling from the perspective of the place where his identity is most fully seen. The place from where the Centurion saw him and declared, 'Truly this is the son of God'. The perspective of the cross.

'Entering into the mystery of the Cross', said Pope Benedict, 'must constitute the heart of the apostolic ministry, the heart of the proclamation of the Gospel designed to lead people to faith'.

That's how our hearts are kept alive and open, pulsating with the love of God: by entering – through scripture, sacrament and silence, prayer, praise and proclamation – the mystery of the cross. Within that mystery we see our true status. Our status as sinners for whom God gave up his most dearly beloved Son. Sinners for whom Christ gave his back to the smiters, his hands to the nails, his body to the cross so that we might have life.

When our hearts have been broken open again by our recognition by faith of our status – *as sinners for whom God's blood in Christ's was shed* – then we will be ready to proclaim afresh the undying love of God to our parishes and communities; a love which is so powerful that it brings a dying creation back to life, life in abundance, life for ever, life with God, life for you, life even for me.