

What makes a good leader?

A sermon preached by the Revd Viv Bridges on the 3rd Sunday of Trinity 12 June '16 in St Peter's Wolvercote
References: 2. Samuel 11; Galatians 2.15-end; Luke 7 36-end

Today we celebrate the Queen's 90th birthday, and it seems to me that the readings are appropriate as they remind us how leaders must be cautious in the use of authority and power.

The story of David and Bathsheba (in 2: Samuel 11) is a wonderful story matching any of the dramas we have on TV today. In the verses before today's reading, the Bible tells us that 'David spotted Bathsheba (Uriah's wife) washing herself, and sent messengers to fetch her. She came to him, and he lay with her. The woman conceived and sent to tell David, 'I am pregnant'. Just like that! For whatever reason, Bathsheba didn't try to resist David's advances, but left it to him to sort things out when she realised she was pregnant. The father couldn't have been her husband Uriah because the reason Bathsheba was washing herself in the reading was to purify herself after a period. In those times, the penalty for adultery was death for both David and Bathsheba, so they had to find a way out. David had authority so he could command all sorts of people to help him. He got some of his soldiers to try to entice Uriah into sleeping with Bathsheba, but this failed, so he made sure that Uriah was put in to a position in battle where he was sure to get killed.

It seems that David thought he could do just whatever he liked because he was the king it didn't matter how he behaved. Nathan, the priest, knew otherwise, but he didn't challenge David directly. We're probably all aware that if someone challenges us directly about something we've done wrong, we tend to dig our heels in, justify what we've done rather than admit that we're wrong. Nathan was wise, so he told David that story about the rich man and the poor man, and David was very quick to judge - to condemn the rich man for his actions. So when Nathan pointed out that the story was really about David and Uriah, David had no option but to admit his own sin which he did and was, it seems, truly sorry for what he had done. So the Lord partially repented, and rather than killing David, allowed the son to die.

This may not seem much of a reprieve to us, still very cruel, but the way the Lord worked in those days was very different. There are many places in the Old Testament when we wonder at how the Lord punished his chosen people, and I'm not going to go there now!

David, then, started out being very arrogant, abused his power, and was quick to condemn someone else until he was shown his sinfulness, acknowledged it and was truly sorry. In the second reading, the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner was also a man with authority, with power. It's not quite clear why he invited Jesus but he obviously didn't respect him because he didn't show Jesus any of the courtesies that would normally be shown to a visitor entering the house of a Jew. The fact that he didn't provide water for Jesus' feet, or greet him with a kiss was really very insulting. Again, it's unclear if this was intentional or just something he forgot but this is unlikely as it was such an integral part of Jewish hospitality. Whatever the reason, it showed him to be an arrogant man, a man quick to judge other people. Just as David was quick to condemn that rich man, Simon the Pharisee was quick to condemn the woman who came and bathed Jesus' feet.

Then, just as Nathan taught David a lesson by telling him a story, Jesus tried to teach Simon a lesson by telling him a story. It's clear that Simon got the point but it sounds as if he acknowledged it very grudgingly, "I suppose the one who had the greater debt would love the creditor more. 'I suppose'! It's not clear here

that Simon was able to acknowledge his own arrogance, his sinfulness even when Jesus pointed out how rude he had been.

So our stories today are, I believe, about ARROGANCE - how easy it is to become arrogant when one has authority, power. David learned his lesson, it's not clear that the Pharisee did so. Throughout the ages, men and women with power have abused that power - attempting to take what they want, or to gain kudos and more power, at the expense of others. This has always led to times of terrible unrest, fear, bloodshed, cruelty. Some of you will have seen *The Hollow Crown* on TV. However overdramatised it may have been, it certainly reminded us that an overwhelming desire for power is a bad thing. Jesus taught us over and over again that this is not how leadership works. Whoever would be a leader must also be a servant. Throughout the ages, it has been clear that this sort of leadership brings peace and stability.

We are fortunate to live in comparative peace and stability. I realise that there are many people who don't agree with the idea of royalty and I have no intention of trying to make any argument for or against, but the bottom line is that we have a monarchy. And I am happy to believe that, whatever people think about monarchy as an institution, nearly everyone agrees that Elizabeth has carried out her job - for it is a job, one that very few people would like to have - with humility, generosity and quite incredible devotion to duty. By her own admission she has tried to be the sort of leader that Jesus Christ encouraged, a 'servant' leader. Because of this, she has been a huge influence for good in many parts of the world. So it is right that we celebrate her long life. Not just because she is our earthly boss but because of the example she has set of a Christian life, and of Christian leadership.

It is always extremely tempting to use any power or authority we may have to satisfy our own desires, often at the expense of others. It is always tempting, when we think we are people of 'standing', to be quick to judge other people and be blind to our own failings. The only way we can resist these temptations is to try always to be open to the Holy Spirit; to spend time in prayer, trying to listen to what God may have to say, and to accept that he may often speak to us through other people. We have to be ready to offer our gifts, our power, our authority to God for him to use in his service. In this way, we pass on some of the unconditional love that he pours out upon us and that he longs to pour out on everyone.

We give thanks for all people who have done this, including our Queen Elizabeth.

Amen