

## Qualities of leadership

*A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers at the 8am and 10am services at St. Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> January 2015 (the Baptism of Christ).*

*Readings: Acts 19.1-7; Mark 1.4-11.*

Whatever we make of the heavens being torn apart, the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove, and the voice from heaven, one thing is clear about Jesus's baptism - the authority he had is given to him from above. The story proclaims loud and clear that Jesus did not appoint himself to any position of authority like a dictator. Nor was he voted in by popular acclaim, like our own politicians. It was a divine appointment from above. Jesus's baptism is his commissioning for ministry, and it comes from on high.

Other figures from history have claimed something similar. Kings, emperors and popes have all at different times seen themselves as divinely appointed. The divine right of kings from the English Civil War and earlier springs to mind. And most of the population would have concurred then. To kill or overthrow a king could be interpreted as an act against divine authority, which is why it was such a rare event. Yet it did happen if the king acted in such a way that he lost the trust of his people. The baronial revolt against King John which led to Magna Carta in 1215, 800 years ago is a good example.

Nowadays in a parliamentary democracy, things are very different. Authority is largely given from below by popular vote. It is a temporary fleeting authority as Margaret Thatcher found out 25 years ago, and either David Cameron or Ed Miliband are likely to find out later this year. What is given from below can easily be taken away from below.

The Church of England manages to embrace a mixture of above and below. Think about the system of appointing a new vicar - the PCC will be doing a lot of that in the coming months. Sorry!

In the Church of England we *neither* have a congregational system where the minister is appointed - called - by the local congregation - from below ... *nor* an entirely episcopal system where the bishop or patron simply send the parish a new vicar with relatively little consultation - 'from above'. That is what used to happen, but not any more.

What happens now is that the PCC draws up a Parish Profile - a description of the sort of parish they are (demography, churchpersonship and so on), recent key developments, their vision for the next few years, and what the new vicar might help them develop.

The post is advertised and the Parish Profile is sent to enquirers. People apply, there is a shortlisting and interviews and a decision is made.

But crucially - and this is where the process is a mixture of above and below - there are three parties involved in the appointment process. First the Bishop, second the Patrons (in St. Peter's case Merton College) and third, two Parish representatives appointed by the PCC. All those three parties, Bishop, Patron and Parish representatives, have to agree on the appointment. So it is neither all from below nor all from above, but a combination of the two. It is a system of checks and balances - the Bishop and Patron can sometimes see a wider picture of the parish and its needs and they have a lot of experience of making appointments. The parish

representatives know their parish and they have to be confident that they can work with the person appointed.

I know as time goes on, the wardens and the PCC will keep everyone informed about the process and progress within the process here in Wolvercote and Wytham. But you will have to be patient. I go in March. The usual length of a vacancy is about nine months, so it may well be the end of the year before a new vicar arrives.

But enough of Church of England appointment processes. What I really want to do today is to reflect on what Jesus's baptism might have to say to us about being a leader. That is obviously relevant to choosing a new vicar - what should we look for in the leaders of our parishes. But you might be thinking 'that's not really relevant to me. I am not a leader'. Except that when you think about it, we are all leaders at different times and in different ways. In our families we take the lead on this or that. In our leisure, we might be organising something with other people. So the reflection I am going to offer may be just as relevant to each of us, as it is to being a politician or a vicar ... or an archdeacon!

There are three things I want to draw out of Jesus's Baptism which seem to me to be important in leadership and indeed all Christian living.

The first is **an openness to repentance**. It may seem strange that Jesus was baptised in the Jordan by John who was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. If baptism is the washing away of an original sin, then surely Jesus as Son of God was exempt from that. If baptism is instead the promise of the washing away of the future sins we will commit in life, as well as the ones we have already committed, then surely Jesus as the perfect, sinless human being, was exempt from that as well. Nonetheless he was baptised, perhaps to express his complete solidarity with the human race. But I think it also points us towards something vital in healthy leadership: the willingness to acknowledge that I am not perfect, I do make mistakes, I don't have all the answers. And perhaps by being baptised Jesus was reminding us of the importance of that. Because if we are not grounded in humility and an awareness of our own fragility and failings, how will we ever be able to fall on our knees before God when we need to say, sorry God I messed up? And how will we ever have the necessary compassion with others when they make their mistakes? Arrogant, unrepentant know-it-alls do not make good leaders.

The second thing I want to draw out is the idea of **immersion**. When we are baptised, the water is symbolic of our immersion in Christ. Full immersion baptism where people are plunged right under the water is a vivid expression of that. And the New Testament is full of images which are similar: we talk about 'putting on Christ' or 'being grafted into Christ' or 'rooted in Him' or 'dwelling in Him and He in us'. Like being immersed, they all speak of us being joined to Christ by our baptism, such that his life grows within us, shaping and guiding us from the inside out. Immersion is that intimate inward state of being to which God calls us and to which we assent. When we embrace it, we continue to be ourselves, but the qualities which make us the unique individuals we are, are directed in Christ-like ways. And we become even more fully the person God wants us to be. Immersed in Christ, we become *both* more Christ-like and more truly ourselves.

This is a key thing we should be looking for in leaders - the willingness to be rooted, immersed, in Christ and his call upon them. But there is another aspect to this idea of immersion. Leaders

need to be immersed in the life of the people/community they serve. They cannot stand aloof from it. They cannot hover above it, only occasionally coming down from head office to meet and greet on the shop floor. "You're all doing really well" and off again. It is noteworthy that God did not choose to visit his creation in the equivalent of a divine helicopter waving from a safe distance at his creatures below. He chose full immersion - birth in a stable, full of muck and smells. And that, I think, models for us the sort of leadership we should be exercising: one rooted in Christ *and* rooted, immersed, fully involved with the community we are there to serve.

So open to repentance, immersed in Christ and community are the first two thoughts. The third is **an openness to the Spirit**. At his baptism, the Spirit descends like a dove upon Jesus. The believers in Ephesus we heard about in the reading from Acts receive the Spirit when Paul lays his hands upon them. The Spirit is the presence of God in creation, in our communities, in us, which sustains and supports and comforts, but also inspires and guides and leads. The inspiration of the Spirit can, I think, come in quiet moments of prayer and reflection - a fresh insight, a new way forward, renewed strength. But it can also come out of discussions, in committee meetings and planning groups. Ideas emerge, often from left-field, and are then shaped and honed by the group. In my experience it is usually the case that what seem like God-given ideas emerge more from groups than individuals on their own, from the corporate Body of Christ rather than any one cell or organ of the Body. Leaders who have all the answers sewn up themselves in advance often find themselves charging ahead with few followers. Leaders attentive to the wisdom of the Spirit emerging from the group, tend to make better progress.

The Spirit descending upon Christ at his baptism is a reminder that he did all in God's strength. And it is a reminder to us of the need to be open to the Spirit in any positions of responsibility we have. That will involve prayer and listening to the wisdom of others, because it is through others that the Spirit will speak. And again this takes a certain humility that we can't know it all ourselves or do it all ourselves. No man is an island. We are one part of the Body of Christ. It is together that we will discern the descent of the Spirit upon us.

So three things to draw out of Jesus's Baptism - openness to repentance; immersion in Christ and community; openness to the Spirit. All three are important wherever we assume leadership roles, but actually all three are important within any Christian living. Amen.