

EZEKIEL 34:1-16
WHERE ARE THE LEADERS?

Leadership has been on our minds a great deal of late. The so-called 'leader of the free world' has been elected in the USA and we have had two different styles of leadership on offer to Americans in Barak Obama and John McCain; the election has been (to some degree) about what kind of leadership America has wanted. Leadership has been a key issue in the political debates in the UK over the last 12 months or so, with all kinds of criticisms being levelled at Gordon Brown and we've seen how that opinion has changed over the last few months as the credit crunch has loomed and been dealt with. Even in Church, we have ordained seven new elders in last six months and they have begun to discover what is involved in church leadership. Good leadership is crucial to any organisation's strength and well-being.

What makes a good leader? How would you answer that question? I have to say that there are all kinds of answers, all kinds of qualities that we would recognise as important in leadership and maybe we would each value something different. Here's a list I found on an Human Resources (personnel) website, ten qualities of any leadership: vision, integrity, dedication, magnanimity, humility, openness, creativity, fairness, assertiveness, a sense of humour. I have also sat with Church groups charged with finding a new minister for their congregation and asked them what they are looking for. They have a great long list of qualities that they want to find in their new minister and of course they paint picture of the ideal minister, who actually doesn't exist! So we know what we admire in a good leader.

We also know bad leadership when we see it. I watched a television programme called *My Family at War* this week; it was an episode that featured the historian Dan Snow, whose great-grandfather had been a general during the First World War. He knew what was said of the leadership of the army in France: the men were lions led by donkeys and he wondered if his great-grandfather had been one of these donkeys; he came to the painful conclusion that the general had been out of his depth; he didn't know what to do, how to react to the situations in which his men were placed. His leadership was inadequate rather than bad. We go from there to leadership that is simply bad – what is it that makes Robert Mugabe a bad president of Zimbabwe? You might not agree with me on that, but... For me, it is his simple selfishness and greed. Here is a man who is wealthy beyond belief and who has made himself wealthy while his people are almost starving and who made the people pay for his national birthday celebrations and who clings hold to power at almost any cost. Leadership can be good, inadequate, or simply bad.

Leadership was the theme of Ezekiel's message to people of Israel in chapter 34; the passage we read is all about the quality of leadership (or lack of it) in Israel. There are a number of groups that Ezekiel has in his sights: the kings and their officials, the priests and the prophets, all those who had some kind of leadership responsibility in Israel. These are the people who are described as the shepherds of Israel. But they are bad shepherds; their leadership doesn't come up to scratch! They are not good leaders, not even inadequate leaders, just bad! Ezekiel paints a picture of these leaders who are supposed to behave towards people in certain ways, but who actually behave in very different ways. "*you eat...*" (34:3,4) There is nothing wrong with eating the curds of sheep's milk, or using the wool for clothes, but this is a picture of the shepherd who takes all the advantages, all the perks, but gives nothing back; he doesn't care about the sheep; he cares only about himself. There are three faults: 1)the leaders exploited the people; 2)they showed no qualities of care; 3)they allowed flock to be scattered and no-one went looking for them. So they became sheep that effectively were without a shepherd.

God's reaction to bad leadership is to do away with it in Israel. The time of the exile saw the end of kings in Israel. There were no more kings. If we had read the piece in between our two readings we would have read this: "*I will...*" (34:10) There would be no more kings because the kings had not been good leaders for God's people. We said two weeks ago that everyone in Israel had to bear some responsibility for the nation being in exile in Babylon, but some are more responsible than others; the leaders bear that burden; more is given to them and more is expected from them. They had failed; they had to bear that burden and God was bringing kingship in Israel to an end. The kings had forgotten that ultimately the people was not theirs; the kingdom was not theirs; but the people and kingdom belonged to God and so they should lead as God wanted. They had forgotten that and paid the price.

Ezekiel paints another picture of a shepherd; God is shepherd of His people; God is the leader of His people. "*as a...*" (34:12, 14, 16) 12 times in these verses God says 'I will' and so shows Ezekiel that He will lead His people and that God will be their shepherd; that He will search for the lost and rescue them and tend them and care for them and help weak. Something of that would be seen when later God led the people of Israel back home after the exile and the nation was established again in and Israel was at home again and the temple was rebuilt and the people enjoyed a new time of peace and prosperity. God was at work to care for His people. This was done through men like Ezra and Nehemiah, good leaders, leaders who cared for the people and who tried to do what God wanted.

There are so many echoes in this passage of Jesus' ministry. Jesus describes Himself as 'the good Shepherd' and tells the story of the lost sheep and the shepherd who goes out to find it as a picture of Himself. But perhaps the most telling echo of this is in these words from Mark's gospel: "*When Jesus...*" (Mk 6:34) Herod was prince, a self-styled king, but no shepherd! Jesus brands the leaders, the priests, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, as 'thieves and robbers' as if all over again Israel had leaders who cared nothing for people, but only for themselves. Certainly one of great temptations of leadership is to feather your own nest at everyone else's expense, is to build your own empire and make yourself king of all that you survey and we can see people who have done that in every walk of life, including Church.

Geo Adam Smith, was an Old Testament teacher in the early twentieth century in the Free Church, and for many years Principal of Aberdeen University. In 1891 he toured Palestine to write a book that became a classic: *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*. Here's what he says about shepherds: "With us sheep are often left to themselves; I do not remember to have seen in the East a flock without a shepherd... on some high moor, across which at night hyenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, armed, leaning on his staff, and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one on his heart, you understand why.. they gave his name to their king and why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice." (p210) Here is a shepherd who cares for his sheep rather than his own well-being first and foremost; who lives to care for, feed, rescue his sheep.

If we are to learn anything from Ezekiel and the story of the exile, we need to learn this – ultimately God is the leader of His people; the leader of the Church is God; we are God's people and so need to be the kind of people that God wants us to be. Our leadership task is to find out what God wants and go with that; that is not always easy and straightforward. The Church is not ours to do with as we want, whether a leader or not; we are not rally free to say 'this is my Church and this is how I want it to be.' We are God's Church – what will He want us to be? Christian leadership is not

always about devising strategies and structures, but is also about listening for God and learning to discern God's will for His people.

Jesus is our model for leadership. Surely that is true of Church: the qualities of those who are in positions of leadership in Church should be shaped, modelled by Jesus. Leaders are to be people who love the Church; who are not out to build our own little empire or make sure that people conform to our opinions and views. The best Church leaders are those who are humble enough to see that the best for Church might be someone else's way, and go that way rather than our own. It also seems to me right to say that Jesus is the model for all leadership. There is a notion of 'public service' – a sense in which people who are appointed to positions of leadership, high office even, are public servants and should see themselves in that way. We want our leaders to be intelligent, creative, assertive to some extent, but we also need our leaders to be able and willing to see the big picture, the picture that says 'what is best for the people? What is for the common good? What can I do to meet the needs of the people for whom I am responsible?' These are the questions that Jesus asked; these are the ways in which Jesus worked, as a leader among His people, serving their needs.

If you have a position of leadership anywhere – in Church, politics, your job or profession, be a leader like Jesus. We should pray for our leaders, in Church, in political life, in the community – let them all be leaders who think like Jesus, whose leadership is modelled on Jesus, whether they know it or not. Let us rejoice that God is our shepherd, that He cares for us and that Jesus laid down His life for us "*the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*" (Jn 10:11)