

Sermon for 21st March 2010
Confident Collaborative Leadership
Lent 5 (Philippians 3:3-14 and John 12:1-8)

This morning I'll be talking about the final strand in our vision statement, which is about 'Shaping confident, collaborative leadership'.

In the gospels we see Jesus as the leader, but he called many people to leadership. During his life on earth he knew he was building a group to carry on the work after he returned to heaven. In the decades after Jesus' death, the early church worked on the basis that everyone had a role to play. We see this in the New Testament letters, for example: Ephesians 4 talks about the building up of the whole Church; and in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul likens the members of a church to different parts of a body – each one having a different part to play.

Over the last thousand years, our Church leadership became more clergy-dominated, but the social revolution of the last half-century has exposed the inadequacy of this style of ministry. And so the church is looking afresh at the ways of the New Testament Church, in particular, that all members of the Church are called to some kind of leadership, and to do that together, collaboratively.

Just to be clear, in case you think this only applies to people who wear dog-collars or who are on the PCC or even Licensed Lay Ministers, leadership applies to all of us! Think of leadership as any time where we take the initiative – and there will be times in all of our faith lives where God calls us to take the initiative.

This morning I want to focus on one aspect of leadership, which is confidence. It seems to me that if we can gain well-founded confidence, we'll automatically get good and collaborative leadership.

I'd like you to look at our gospel reading now. Six days before the last supper, Jesus is at a dinner in his honour, laid on and attended by his close friends. A number of characters are described, they are all leaders in some sense. What confidence do you see in them?

- Martha: Serving, not complaining as in Luke 10:38-41. Quiet confidence in what she's doing. No longer fussed about what others are/aren't doing. Interesting transformation since the raising of her brother Lazarus?
- Mary: Extravagant confidence - enough to blow a huge amount of money on perfume (equivalent to current value of £15k). It's because she knows who and what Jesus is, and anoints Jesus' feet (not his head) – servants deal with the feet.
- Judas: Very confident in his criticism. Saying all the right things, sounds wonderfully altruistic. But later they found out he was taking the money for himself.

- Jesus: The 'leader' and honoured guest at the meal. Mostly quiet except for his wise and firm put-down of Judas and his affirmation of Mary. You see, Mary understands, Judas doesn't seem to get it.

Interesting to reflect that Jesus chose Judas as a disciple, but not Mary. Judas looks and sounds very confident, but it's Mary's deep but quiet confidence which shows that she 'gets it', though it draws much criticism – a little warning there that Christian leadership is costly.

So here's my question for you this morning: when does our confidence come from within us and when is it rooted in God?

This is what Paul talks about in our extract from Philippians today. To paraphrase: I have every reason to be confident in my self (fine pedigree, jumped through all the religious hoops, followed all the rules), yet it was all a waste of time, compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my master.

And it's the same for you and me: until we recognise the surpassing value of Jesus, we risk being led by the desires of our egos. Because the world is constantly telling us to have confidence in ourselves, encouraging us that we can do whatever we want. No-one knows this better than the advertising agencies. So many advertising slogans appeal direct to the ego:

Have it your way (Burger King);
Just do it (Nike);
Once you pop, you can't stop (Pringles);
Because you're worth it (L'Oreal).

Only when we recognise the surpassing greatness of Christ Jesus, will we let go of these attractions because we know they're not the real deal – there's a much bigger force that really sustains us.

As long as our confidence rests in ourselves, it's fragile and we have to protect it. Football provided me with an illustration of this. Last Tuesday night Reading played Queens Park Rangers and we thrashed them 1-0. However, all the talk was of Reading's centre back, Matt Mills. Matt had made some bad passes, got jeered by the crowd and retorted, giving the crowd a one-fingered salute. Matt's a talented young player – he's probably learned a lot this week, I hope he goes on to use his God-given footballing gifts and be the role model that we'd hope all professional athletes to be. But to use St Paul's language, if you know the surpassing value of Christ Jesus, then the jeers of the crowd are nothing to you, because your confidence is rooted in God who has something much, much bigger.

Paul's confidence became rooted in God very suddenly on the road to Damascus. For most of us I guess it's a more haphazard three-steps-forward-two-steps-back kind of progress. Often it

takes a traumatic event to trigger that palpable recognition of God's greatness. Certainly that has been my personal experience. About ten years ago, God got me into a place where my own resources and ingenuity finally ran out. It was like becoming exhausted in a swimming pool and discovering you were out of your depth. And it was at that drowning-point that God's power took over and I realised I was being sustained by something else. That was my first real sense of God's surpassing greatness, where I gained a new-found confidence - confidence in Christ Jesus, not my own ability.

And when we're living in that new-found confidence in God, which I hope and pray we can all do at least some of the time, we can gain some of that deep, quiet confidence that Mary showed: maybe you are called to take the initiative doing outrageous works for God, maybe you are called to take a role of formal leadership in the church through PCC, or maybe called to show simple acts of kindness, spending time with someone who needs a friendly person to talk to.

Whatever it is God wants us to be doing, if our confidence is rooted in Him and his power, we will find ourselves working together to build his Kingdom, and transforming all human life in Burghfield, in Christ. Amen

Blessings,
Kevin