

Trinity 12 (Proper 16)

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 22 August 2021

Readings: Ephesians 6 vv 10-20 and John 6 vv 56-69

It's not a good time to be a political leader. The appalling scenes from Afghanistan that have dominated our television screens and social media in the last week have exposed the failures of both the Afghani leaders and the leaders of the United States of America and other Western states.

Yes, there have been remarkable scenes of courage and compassion by the American soldiers pictured carrying the children passed over the fences by their desperate Afghani parents. We have seen the British ambassador, Sir Laurie Bristow, personally issuing visas at the airport in Kabul.

But I read a devastating article yesterday about the ousted Afghani president, Ashraf Ghani. There was a sense of 'damning with faint praise' as the author explained that President Ghani was relatively uncorrupt and would have been as keen to escape his country with his library, even if there are allegations that he left with suitcases stuffed with banknotes. He was portrayed as an intellectual with no grasp of the realities of life for most of his people. President Joe Biden was elected last year, perhaps not because the American people saw him as a great leader in waiting but because he was not Donald Trump. Even those who are Biden supporters have been disappointed by an apparent failure of leadership over the last few weeks in the face of the speed of the Taliban takeover of one city after another in Afghanistan. It is deeply shocking to see faces of people who are full of fear.

Across the English Channel, the Brexit bounce, and the initial success of the vaccination programme in England, which allowed many people to give Boris Johnson the benefit of the doubt, appear to be waning. Opinion polls in today's papers are suggesting that the Conservative Party has only a slim lead.

Here in Guernsey, we see apparently contradictory reports of the views of political leaders on proposals on whether or not to increase taxation – and, if so, how to do it. We shall see what happens.

The Church is not immune from criticism. We are rightly held to account for some appalling failures in safeguarding children and young people. Our bishops have been under criticism in England for the way in which they have led the Church during the COVID-19 pandemic, even if some of the criticism is unfair. There has been much hostility to some of the recent and necessary conversation about how to turn round the decline which the Church, like every other institution of civil society, is seeing.

In short, the authority, legitimacy, and integrity of leadership of every type is in question today.

This is, of course, nothing new. It has never been easy to be a leader. Think of a great Biblical leader like Moses, who led the people of Israel in the Sinai desert for some forty years. Even though he had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, Moses was the target of criticism and sniping. The people of Israel complained to Moses, 'Yes, you spoke with God. You parted the Red Sea so that we could escape, and you brought us the law from the top of Mount Sinai. You even interceded with God so that water flowed from solid

rock and you persuaded God to feed us with quail and manna. But what have you done for us recently?’

It’s very much along the lines of the wonderful ‘what did the Romans ever do for us’ scene in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*.

When hotel magnate Leona Helmsley said ‘only the little people pay taxes’, she expressed some of the arrogance that powerful people sometimes exhibit.

In every age, leaders need to demonstrate efficacy and trustworthiness; but they also need to show compassion and affection towards those whom they lead. Only when people recognise the integrity and compassion of leaders will they be prepared to respond and trust.

Whilst it would be wrong to see the Bible as in any sense a management textbook, there is much that the scriptures can tell us about the challenges of leadership and how to lead well. Equally, there are examples that show the opposite. Herod got himself into an appalling position when he was unwilling to lose face, and allowed the beheading of John the Baptist. Some of the kings of Israel exhibited behaviour that can only be described as appalling, whilst others show humility and leadership.

Leadership can only be exercised when there is trust, which is hard to win and easily lost, whether in the world at large or in the household of faith, the Church. In chapter 5 of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, ‘Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.’ But that presumes the quality of character of those to whom we are to be subject, about which Paul has already written: ‘Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.’

Chapter 6 of the letter to the Ephesians begins with a series of statements of the complementary and mutual obligations of different members of the community of faith. Children are to obey their parents. But parents are not to provoke their children to anger. Slaves are also bidden to be obedient and to serve with enthusiasm. But those with power over them are not to resort to threats. We may recoil from anything that seems to condone slavery, but Paul presents mutual obligations in a way that would have been very different to the common experience of his time.

And then Paul gives us the rousing conclusion to his letter. It is a way of living which is also a model of leadership, which is so different to what we see all too often. We hear at the end of the gospel reading today that many of the people who had followed Jesus from the beginning of his ministry drifted away because they could not face the demands that Jesus placed before them. Jesus’ message was, and is, counter cultural. It is challenging.

‘Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.’ Paul offers us hope as we seek to sustain ourselves in our discipleship and as we seek to live and to proclaim the gospel of peace and hope in a world that is hurting in the vacuum of good leadership. We can wear God’s armour, which Paul describes, as we fight the good fight – which is God’s battle against evil and destruction, against all that makes human beings less than what God wants us to be.