

4th February 2018

Servant Leadership: Isaiah 42.1-9; John 13.3-17

Last weekend for my birthday we went to the cinema to see the latest film about Churchill: *The Darkest Hour*. The film is set in 1940 after the outbreak of the War and at a pivotal moment when Neville Chamberlain is forced to resign as Prime minister and Churchill takes over, without the support of many in his own party. Many regard him as a drunk and a hot head, who has a history of bad judgement and failures and who is all about himself. Faced with the onslaught of Nazi forces into western Europe and the imminent fall of France and the slaughter of British forces pushed back to Dunkirk, many in his war cabinet plead for him to sue for a peace deal with Hitler. Rather than face another war and probable annihilation and servitude, they think the reasonable thing to do is ask for terms now. Churchill is not convinced saying you can't reason with a tiger when your head is in a tiger's mouth. This is a spoiler alert, in case you intend to see the film – although as it is history you already know what happens – but the film takes grand poetic licence to describe how Churchill finally comes to his decision not to surrender.

Absurdly, because it never remotely happened, Churchill on the way back to the War Cabinet to give a final decision on whether to surrender to Hitler, decide to get out of his chauffeur driven car and take the tube. On the tube he talks to the ordinary man and woman and canvasses their opinion. Are they ready for war or should we seek terms with Herr Hitler? Never surrender they all say in unison. Churchill storms into the war Cabinet with those words on his lips, immortalised in his speech to the Commons:

‘We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender’.

The film is a good study in leadership and particularly in leadership intuition. In fact, arguably the scene where Churchill consults with the commoners on the tube detracts and demans Churchill's own leadership intuition making it seem like he was dependent on popular sentiment. The facts suggested the reasonable thing to do was make a settlement. Churchill's intuition was he couldn't trust Hitler and that Nazism was evil and you could never accommodate evil you should only resist it. The rest as they say is history.

If you want to be reminded how close we came to losing our freedom and have swastikas flying in our land then go and see the film. Be reminded of the cost and courage of doing what's right, even when people don't support you. But how true leaders make a difference.

This month we are looking at the topic of leadership. You may be a leader, you may consider yourself a leader, you may aspire to be a leader. You may be a follower, who can appreciate a good leader or you are disgruntled or disillusioned at the leadership you are experiencing.

In Britain at the moment there seems to be a crisis of leadership. There is something rotten in the popular view of leadership. There are regular stories of leaders just being in it for themselves, showing no loyalty to their workforce and their pension funds, awarding themselves excessive salaries and behaving insensitively and even abominably in the case of sexual harassment and abuse to others. Carillion, Presidents Club are just the latest manifestations of the lack of quality leadership in our country, a lack of integrity, servanthood, character and morality, where the only thing that matters is the bottom line – profit, money power and looking after number one.

Such attitudes infect and corrode trust and morale in wider society.

So, this month we will look at some biblical leaders and draw on their examples so explore the theme of leadership. I shall be drawing on insights from John Maxwell and his book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*¹. With a title like that you can tell it's American, but don't let the title put you off. It's a great book full of wisdom from both a Church Pastor and successful business man. The sermon series will also tie in with our Daily Bible Notes from IBRA

The first topic today is Servant Leadership. Jesus of course, memorably took a towel and washed his disciple's feet. He undertook a menial task to make a point. Leadership is not about titles and positions but about serving others, being prepared to get your hands dirty, not thinking about ruling over others but serving others and in the process transforming others.

John Maxwell says that in a world where many political leaders enjoy their power and prestige and where CEOs of large corporations make astronomical incomes, work and live in luxury and appear to be most concerned with what's in it for them, he highlights the person of Jim

Sinegal. Sinegal is the founder of Costco, the ninth largest retailer in the world. Maxwell says Sinegal doesn't seem interested in perks. He works in an unremarkable office on a put you up table. If he invites someone in to meet him at the corporate offices, he goes down to the lobby to meet his guest personally. He answers his own phone. And he takes only \$350,000 salary a year which puts him in the bottom 10% of CEOs of large corporations. He didn't attend a top school but worked his way up from the shop floor. The most distinctive thing that separates him from his competitors is the way he treats his employees. He believes in paying his employees well and offering them good benefit packages. Costco employees get paid an average of 42% more than the company's chief rival. He believes if you pay people well 'you get good people and good productivity'. You also get employee loyalty and Costco has the lowest employee turnover rate in all of retailing. But he also goes out of his way to show Costco workers that he cares about them. He maintains an open-door policy with everyone. He wears an employee's name tag, is on first name basis and makes sure every store he visits a least once a year. 'No manager and staff in any business feels very good if the boss is not interested enough to come and see them' says Sinegal. He once flew from Texas to San Francisco when he heard a Costco executive was hospitalised for emergency surgery. It came

as no surprise to the executive. It was consistent with the way Sinegal leads. He also made sure that people are treated well and are given credit where credit is due. 'it's improper for one person to take credit when it takes so many people to build a successful organization asserts Sinegal. When you try to be top dog, you don't create loyalty. If you can't give credit (and take blame), you will drown in your inability to inspire.'

Harry Truman once said, 'It's amazing what you can accomplish when you don't care who gets the credit.'

The only criticism of Sinegal comes from Wall Street. Analyst there believe Sinegal is too kind and generous to his people. They would like to see him pay employees less and squeeze them more. But Sinegal is more focused on adding value to people by serving them than on serving himself or making himself richer with an exorbitant salary.

Why should leaders lead and when they do, what is their first responsibility? If you were to ask a lot of leaders, you might hear a variety of responses. You might hear that a leader's job is to:

Be in charge

Make the organization run smoothly

make money for themselves or the share holders

Build a great company and better than the competition

Does a leader's motive matter, or is it simply getting the job done that's important? What's the bottom line?

John Maxwell remembers addressing a group of government officials in a developing nation and teaching those leaders to add value by serving others. He writes that he could sense many of the audience looked uncomfortable. After the talk he asked one of his hosts why that was. The host said, 'you have to realise that probably more than half of those people killed someone to obtain their current position of power'.

Many people view leadership the same way they view success, hoping to go as far as they can, to climb the ladder. But contrary to conventional thinking Jesus says the bottom line for Christian leadership isn't how far we advance ourselves but how far we advance others. This is achieved by serving others and adding value to their lives/. Are you being a positive influence on others? Are you making things better for the people who follow you?

Human beings are naturally selfish. I'm selfish. I like my own comfort. I would prefer to be lazy. I don't like going out of my comfort zone. I'd rather be served than serve. So, imagine the shock of those first disciples when their leader, the son of God, got up and washed their feet. A god who serves not to be served? It was a whole different mindset. The disciples had a reputation for squabbling about who would get the best seat in the coming kingdom of God. Who would get to sit at Jesus right hand? They were in it for the power and the glory. Jesus pointedly challenges them about their motives.

Leaders, even if they are serving others, sometimes need to be forthright and blunt, from the best of motives, because they want to keep others focused on the right things. Jesus would not have been serving his disciples well if he had been a pushover, if he hadn't challenged them. You have to do people a service by challenging them and their motives/prejudices.

Albert Einstein asserted 'only a life lived in the service of others is worth living'. Great leadership means great service. When you serve people you lift them up, you help them advance, you make them part of something bigger than themselves and assist them in becoming who they

were made to be. Jesus of course came to give life, life in all its fulness. It wasn't about him – it was about others. He gave his life that others might live.

Isaiah describes himself as the servant of the Lord. he was a great prophet, called the prince of prophet and the Shakespeare of the Bible. He received a vision of god after his earthly king, king Uzziah had died. Uzziah is recorded as a good king of Israel but who would replace him. Isaiah might have lost his earthly king but he saw God who rules the entire universe sat on his throne. That is often how the way God works. He uses our losses and failures and challenges us to get our attention, so that he can show himself to us, grow us and draw us nearer to him.

When we see God, we see ourselves. Isaiah was immediately overcome by his own sinfulness and inadequacy: 'woe to me. I am a man of unclean lips' he said.

But that encounter with God inspired Isaiah to serve him. His first reaction to encountering God was awe, because of God's glory. His second was fear, because of his inadequacy. But his third response was a desire to serve. When God asked 'whom shall I send? Who will go for us?' Isaiah said, 'Here am I send me!'.

When we truly encounter God and get a sense of his love for us, especially though Jesus, one who loves us despite our shortcomings, how can we feel anything other than gratitude? And how can we better show our gratitude than by serving him?

Out of this experience with God, Isaiah wanted to go to the people with His message. But he could not have taken the life changing message to others without first encountering the life changing God. This is how God works in our lives. An encounter with God is prerequisites for his sending us out to be a messenger and servant for him. We must be changed before we can encourage others to change.

If a person doesn't humble themselves, they leave God no choice but to humble them. God is God, and there is no other. If you are wrapped up in yourself God won't allow his work to be thwarted by someone like that. When we confess our inadequacy, and know our unworthiness God never wants to leave us there. God comes with cleansing, new life and new purpose. Then you begin to change for the better. You can't get to your future until you settle your past. God loves you, even as you are, but he does not want to leave you where you were but to change you for the better. God never wants to see us stop growing.

Isaiah began his leadership and service with a touch from God. It was his starting point. But he no doubt needed to continue looking to God and receiving his touch in order to lead and serve others.

ⁱ John C Maxwell, The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, Thomas Nelson, 2007

May the spirit of God anoint you to serve the Lord in justice and peace.