

St Mary Abbots

Easter 3 2022

Acts 9:1-20 & John 21:1-19

Father Christopher, Eucharist

What is your leadership style?

Transformational; charismatic; ethical; laissez-faire; bureaucratic; democratic; autocratic?

This is the kind of question you might be expected to answer in today's Church of England, or at least so goes the stereotype of the modern church.

As we have been developing our Mission Action Plan we have sometimes had to think about how translatable some modern management-speak and strategies are to a church context.

It is perhaps easy, and even a little cheap, to snipe at jargon, and I lifted those terms from a quick Google search rather than any church website.

But while I think it's important to have some kind of strategy – and in our case we've decided to focus on welcoming people; developing as disciples of Christ; and on outreach to those beyond the church – we hit a slightly raw nerve when discussing what 'success' in the church might look like.

We have some natural distaste for the word 'success', and I think rightly. Mother Emma said in one of our meetings that success as a Christian means being crucified. This was not to say that there aren't lots of good things we can be doing and achieving, but that they in themselves are not what we're about – they are not our goal.

Even if we have a range of things we want to do, and use 'worldly' methods to do them at times, our goal as Christians must always be very different from the goals of any other kind of organisation, including the businesses we might at time borrow methods or strategy from. And in today's reading from St John's gospel we see what leadership meant for the first leader of the church, St Peter.

The start of this passage is very reminiscent of one in St Luke's gospel: the first call of the disciples to follow Jesus. We are back at the edge of the Sea of Galilee, and some of those first disciples are fishing again, when Jesus appears on the lakeshore.

The evangelist is I think very clever in the way he tells this story. Interestingly, I think he relies on our knowing St Luke's gospel, which was written some years before.

And, as in some films where the final scene returns to the start of the film, so here we are expected to recognise the setting.

It appears that everything has gone back to how it was; a new day is beginning.

And yet.. We know all that has passed since that first call of the disciples.

We thought they had left everything and followed Him. And yet, here they are again, after Jesus's death and first two resurrection appearances to the disciples, back fishing again. Has this world-shattering ministry, life and death, made no difference after all?

There is perhaps a sense of trauma in the simplicity.

'*I am going fishing*', Simon says, interestingly using his old name again.

'*We will go with you,*' the others respond, fishing at night, as they did in ancient times, knowing the fish are more active then.

From being an unlikely disciple in the first place, Simon Peter is now an even more unlikely leader, fishing naked as he is, having betrayed Jesus by denying that he knew him in the courtyard of the High Priest's house, and then fleeing the scene of His death as a criminal on the cross.

On seeing Jesus, it takes the Beloved Disciple, the one who stayed with Jesus, to say to Simon that it is the Lord.

Simon may now throw clothes on, but he shows none of the dignity you might expect from a leader. Even though they are only a hundred yards from land, and the other disciples therefore quite naturally remain in the boat for the remaining distance, with their miraculous catch, in the boat, Simon Peter throws himself into the water, desperate to reach Jesus, forgetting himself in his love for Him.

We, and he, are reminded again of his denial of Jesus – the last charcoal fire we saw was in that courtyard. But now Jesus is offering food, and asking the disciples to bring what they have to the meal, as Peter drags the net, unbroken in its fulness.

'Come and eat.'

No accident that some early depictions of the Eucharist show bread and fish. And yet, despite the hospitality offered, Jesus pushes Peter, reminding Him again of his three-fold denial of Jesus. '*I do not know the man*' becomes '*You know that I love you.*' The note of hurt is obvious, as Jesus asks three times, '*Simon son of John, do you love me.*'

But now Simon has grown, he has matured. Earlier, much before Jesus's death, Simon Peter said to Jesus, full of hubris, '*Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.*' Now he has learned of his own weakness. His own sin in so easily denying Jesus.

But the remarkable thing is that in a world which valued strength and power, as the Roman world did, here we have a man who is so obviously broken in many ways, who has made mistakes, who is poor, being chosen to feed, to tend, Jesus's flock; being chosen as the rock on which the Church would be built. And this is not a moralising kind of story. We are not told, Simon could not become Peter without being broken, without sinning, repenting and learning. He is just presented as he is. This is a man, like us – his story is simply told, and we take what moral we will from it.

See ourselves in him, or others.

But somehow we see that it is through his brokenness that his strength comes; and that it is through his brokenness that he is somehow now ready for '*someone else [to] fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go*', as his own death upside down on a cross is obliquely referred to.

He boasted of being ready to die for Jesus, but only now, after knowing what it is to fail, to be broken as a man, is he now ready to teach others, to be that rock; and to follow Jesus even to death, death on his own cross.

Such suffering is not for us all, certainly not to aim for. Such people, broken, sinful, coming to Jesus just as we are, with nothing to give, simply to receive Him, to follow Him; such people, and such a life, is what success looks like for us.

Amen