



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2024**

**Readings:** *Psalm 111; I Kings 2.10-12 and 3.3-14; John 6.51-58*

**Trinity X11**

Well, while we were away the news didn't get much better, did it. Indeed, it got so bad that I broke my holiday habit, which is not to watch the news while I am away. But once I became aware of what was happening, it felt that responsible citizenship required one to keep up to date with what was happening, at least in one's own land.

So, how are we feeling about the state of the world? Do we think it's fulfilling God's purpose, and our dreams?

A much-lamented colleague of mine used to quote an old limerick that puts it well.

God's plan had a hopeful beginning  
but we spoilt its chances by sinning.  
We trust that the story  
will end with God's glory,  
but at present the other side's winning.<sup>1</sup>

Maybe we even feel uncertain and anxious because of what's happening in our own land. And if we do here, how about if we were in troubled communities elsewhere in the United Kingdom, or in Myanmar, or in the Middle East, or in Ukraine and Russia, or in other places entirely forgotten or worse still known about but neglected? Fay Sampson offers prayers for use if we are living with dementia. I wonder if one of them actually speaks into our era more generally:

'Lord, in my darkening path, take me by the hand and share your courage with me.'<sup>2</sup>

Now, somewhere at the heart of our concern for this world where 'the other side's winning' there can be the sense that leadership is an issue. If we are in leadership roles ourselves, we can find ourselves when all around us feels so difficult being drained of confidence, and perhaps fear the Peter Principle, that we have been promoted to one degree of responsibility beyond our competence. If we are subject to the leadership of others, it is ever so easy to pick holes in their strategies and fruitfulness, forgetting that very often our leaders' leadership is only as effective as is our followership.

So it is that leadership is frequently discussed in prejudicial ways – whether it is critiquing The Church's leaders, as we watch so much change and seem to become seriously vulnerable; those leading the Government, as prosperity, peace and stability can seem so precarious; the leaders of commerce, of industry, of the public sphere, of the third sector, as costs rise, rewards reduce, efficiency suffers, and integrity is far from universal; and one can even hear criticism of how people lead within their families, whether it's others' parenting of their children which we'd do differently, or children's caring for ageing parents 'on their darkening path'.

So, what might our faith feed into our understanding of leadership, whether it's leadership expected from us, or that we expect from others?

I read with interest of Solomon succeeding King David on the throne of ancient Israel. This is to be a reign of some forty years. His errors and adversaries are recorded in the first book of the Kings<sup>3</sup> as much as they would be in the first edition of the tabloids today, but alongside the quirks and flaws Solomon in I Kings is feted as the builder of the Temple, that Temple which is so fundamental to the nation's faith and the people's identity. With regard to Solomon's leadership style, there is something I

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<sup>1</sup> Anon 1969 *New Comic Limericks* London: Roger Schlessinger Publications page 12

cited by D. Alan Maker, 2020 in *The End is in the Beginning: the triumphant completion of creation* Wandsbeck, South Africa: Reach Publishers page 43 altd

<sup>2</sup> Sampson, Fay 2017 *Prayers for dementia and how to live with it* London: Darton, Longman and Todd page 23

<sup>3</sup> I Kings 11

find invaluable in the way he began his reign, as it's narrated in those earlier chapters of I Kings that we just heard. I want to note just three of those characteristics.

First, he references his father, David – both David's qualities, and his trust in God. Secondly, Solomon speaks of his own relationship to the Lord – how it is Yahweh who has given him the throne, and how much, in his callow youthfulness, he knows his need of the Lord's help. And thirdly, we heard of Solomon commencing his reign with really insightful requests. In particular, he asks for 'an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil'.

Demonstrably, these three things that characterise the beginning of Solomon's reign did not make him perfect, thank goodness. After all, saints are so hard to live with, and even more difficult to emulate. Just as we wonder how in our imperfection we can be good leaders, or followers, so we can afford to look to imperfect Solomon, and still gain something to equip and inspire us.

1. Solomon's respect for his father reminds us to look to the rock from which *we* are hewn. <sup>4</sup> Many of us will find much in our forebears to admire and be grateful for. It could be their personality, their virtues, their achievements. Some of us will be sitting here as people of faith because of the faith of those from which we are hewn. But maybe, like Solomon, there is stuff in our back story that is more colourful, perhaps it's darker even. Looking to the rock from which we are hewn doesn't have to be an unquestioning idealising of our yesterday, so much as a valuable source of understanding where we have come from, what's in our genes, why we are the way we are. Leadership requires self-knowledge, self-awareness. And that is where Solomon finds the calibre of his leadership, by his willingness to look at his life and where he's come from.
2. Solomon's openness to God models for us a leadership that accepts how precious it is to know our need of God, and to give time to worshipping and serving God. In other words, to recognise that we are not entire unto ourselves, no, not one of us in entire unto ourselves. <sup>5</sup> There is One without whom we cannot live or move or have our being, ... or lead. <sup>6</sup> We don't have to have a super-sophisticated theological understanding, to root our lives in faith. As one wise preacher used to say, 'Faith is our acceptance, with humility and gratitude, of God's acceptance of us,' <sup>7</sup> and Solomon seems to have 'got' that. Indeed, with his commitment to the worship practices of his day – one thousand burnt offerings on the altar at Gibeon - Solomon helps us see how fruitful participating in the liturgy – in what we're doing here today - can be. Taking part in the church service is not really to educate us, though it might, perhaps. Less still is it to indoctrinate us. Rather, I like the definition that says, 'Liturgy – what we're doing here - is soul food. It nourishes our souls just as breakfast nourishes our bodies.' <sup>8</sup> The leader who gives such time and space to God is opening themselves to the wisdom and the love that are the essence both of God and of leadership. Such humble readiness to receive those jewels – wisdom and love - can only be for the common good of the Church, of the nation, of our family.

So, we see that Solomon points us to *leading* in a way that's rooted in knowing where we are from, and in engaging with the things of God.

3. Thirdly, though, this rookie ruler asks for the right things: the specific wisdom to know the difference between right and wrong. You see, leadership needs resourcing. Because good leadership it's always and axiomatically about teamwork, it's partly about those with whom one surrounds oneself - the canny choosing of those who complement rather than clone what one brings oneself. Thriving leadership is also about the information with which one equips oneself, so what one reads matters, *that* one reads matters. Time reading is rarely time wasting. But Solomon's faith-influenced leadership also includes prayer for God's help in discerning good

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<sup>4</sup> cf Isaiah 51.1f

<sup>5</sup> cf John Donne 1573-1631, from *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* 1674

<sup>6</sup> cf Acts 17.28

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, Ernest, 1973 *Locked in a room with open doors* Waco: Word Books; cited by Maker, page 155

<sup>8</sup> Claiborne, Shane, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro 2010 *Common Prayer: a liturgy for ordinary radicals* Grand Rapids: Zondervan page 11

from evil. He doesn't ask for status or wealth – though in truth he didn't *need* to ask for status or wealth; he already had those in shed loads. The example he sets for us is precisely the realisation that even the richest, even the most able, even the most privileged of us need to know that there *is* evil and there is good; that leadership requires the integrity which eschews the one and pursues the other. And goodness knows, in The Church and the world 'the other side really does win' whenever we loosen our hold on that distinction.

So, thanks be for Solomon. I want to close, though, by pointing to Jesus and to *his* way of leading. We heard him defined as 'living bread' who gives life to the world. Jesus is life-giving bread in myriad ways, but they include the counter-cultural way in which he leads. We do well to let it feed our own understanding of the leadership that our era needs, as much as has any other.

First, he knows his identity to be found in God. He is God's beloved Son. That is the rock from which he is hewn. He is only as he is found in his Father. And so are we. Secondly, his sole purpose is to serve God's purpose in achieving the salvation of all creation. In other words, he came not to be served but to serve God's intention that all things should be reconciled.<sup>9</sup> And so ought we. Thirdly, Jesus leads by giving and loving to the uttermost. And so should we. And finally, he recognises the essential place of self-care in the leader's capacity to lead. He can only give as he receives; only feed as he is fed. And so can we.

Such, then, is the gift of establishing our understanding of leadership upon the foundation of faith in God as we find it in King Solomon and in Jesus Christ.

The music for reflection, which draws upon Psalms 4 and 5, brings these thoughts to a close with the reminder that any leading we might do in The Church, in the world, in our home, is given its effectiveness as we follow the lead of the Lord. 'Lead me, Lord, lead me in thy righteousness.'

You see,  
God's story is *still* full of promise,  
e'en though each behaves like a novice.  
We must just trust the story,  
embodying love's glory,  
for promise to flourish through service.

Amen

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<sup>9</sup> cf II Corinthians 5.11ff