

Is 53:4-12; Ps 91:9-16; Heb 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

What do you look for in a leader? Someone who knows their mind and is full of confidence? Someone who has a clear vision of where he or she wants to take you? Someone who speaks in a very clear and direct way?

Or... someone who listens carefully to what others have to say and takes it into account in their decision making? Someone who encourages others to take on responsibility for themselves?

Would you follow someone who doesn't say that they have all the answers or perhaps even suggest that there aren't always straightforward answers? Would you follow someone who is at times hesitant about what they should do? Surely you would not follow someone who would allow them to be captured, insulted, tortured, and killed by the authorities of the day?

Jesus was a leader, with many followers, but in many ways he was not the leader his followers expected. James and John clearly strongly believed that Jesus was something very special, the Messiah, who would sweep all the enemies of the Jewish people before him. They believed in his power, they believed in him as a leader. But they certainly did not understand the true nature of Jesus, at least at this time. They wanted to be sat at the right and left hand of Jesus when he sat on his throne when all of his glory was revealed.

If we are being charitable, we could take it that James and John just wanted to be close to Jesus and deeply involved in all that he would do in the future. Or it could be that they were actually ambitious for themselves. In Matthew's account it is the mother of these brothers who puts them forward to be given such prominence. Jesus did not gather together a group of incredibly good people as his disciples. They were no super-heroes, but ordinary human beings, good in many ways, but also flawed.

They were flawed, but they managed to build the early Church, and spread the Gospel message into a largely hostile world. We can take comfort that God was able to use them despite their faults. Although, that does then mean that we have to consider even more carefully how God might use us.

So how well do we understand the nature of Jesus?

We have very few of the words Jesus spoke and of course we don't have them first-hand. Perhaps it is just as well that he spoke in parables as these are in some ways less prone to distortion than simple words. Although we often still need to get into the culture of the times and have some understanding of the history of the Jewish people.

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah this morning gives an important insight into the nature of Jesus. It uses the image of what is often referred to as the suffering servant. The words immediately before today's reading are famously used in the libretto of Handel's Messiah, but also often feature in the readings used around Easter. '*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*'.

In his very suffering Jesus would help us to relate to him more easily in some ways than Jesus revealed only as the powerful son of God. What is more it demonstrates that he can, **he does**, relate to us, even us in the darkest of times. Jesus usually referred to himself as 'son of man' to underline his identity with humanity, although perhaps also to show humility or avoid confrontation.

So we have this seemingly paradoxical picture of Jesus as Son of God, someone we rightly call Lord and King, with an apparently weak and helpless servant. It can be, to be honest, a disturbing concept to come to terms with. Disturbing for those who benefit from the more conventional world picture of what it means to lead and be successful.... and indeed it can be disturbing for us. How do we bring these two faces of Jesus together in our mind? In what ways do they affect how we follow Jesus today?

But it is an important thing to get to grips with if we are to understand the nature of Jesus, of God. As well as demonstrating the empathy of God with the suffering humans endure, I think at least two other things are shown by the suffering servant aspect of Jesus.

First there is the sense that Jesus is, as it states in Mark verse 5, at the end of our Gospel reading, that he was a '*ransom for our sins*'. Our Isaiah reading says '*by his wounds are we healed*'. Through his willingness to suffer and die he demonstrated the power of his love. Add to that it was done as something he did not need to do and that makes them even more of a demonstration of love.

Second, he is leading by example to serve and love; to serve and not be served. This is a leader who shows humility and demonstrates his care, because that is how he wants to change the world; that is how he wants us to live.

In his conversation with James and John, Jesus talks of the cup, the experiences they will share. The brothers probably think that these will largely be joyful experiences, but we know that they will have to go through hardships and indeed James at least was martyred. As Christians, should we expect hardships? Well many Christians through history have been persecuted in a whole range of ways from the subtle like being excluded and ignored, to the most severe, including imprisonment, torture, and being killed. Around the world today lives can be harder because of the faith of believers.

That doesn't mean that being a Christian is without joy – we have joy in worship, we have the joy of fellowship with each other, and yes we can laugh, sing and dance, enjoy food and drink and generally have a good time! But yes our service can involve taking up our crosses to follow him.

Our reading from Hebrews introduces yet another element into the picture we have of the nature of Jesus as a leader, that of high priest. It actually says 'high priest in the order of Melchizedek'. So who on earth was Melchizedek? Well apart from having, I think, one of the most interesting names in the Bible, he was a priest and a king. He was the first person in the Bible to be titled a priest. He features in Genesis 14:18-20, where he meets Abram –

'Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, "Blessed be Abram to the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth, And blessed be the most high God, who has delivered your enemies into your hand"'

His name literally translates as 'my king is righteousness' and the name he uses for God *El-Elyon*, is used about another 20 times in the Psalms. Melchizedek himself features in Psalm 110, as quoted in Hebrews – 'you are a priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek'. He also seems to have become identified with the figure of the Messiah in some other writings. So the writer to the Hebrews had some good reasons to mention Melchizedek.

In case you missed it, note that he brought bread and wine out to Abram, so there is a clear link to the act of communion. Perhaps in the Anglican Church there is a not much of an emphasis laid upon Jesus as our priest. In other reformed churches much more is made of it – the statement 'no priest but Christ' is one I have come across quite often.

I come from a particular church background and understanding, but I understand the role of a priest as follows. A priest acts as some sort of intermediary between us and God, in particular relating to offering sacrifices. We of course have direct access to God, in our prayer and in our worship. Where Jesus comes in as high priest is that he has done the sacrifice, in fact he also has **been** the sacrifice. What we do now in communion is remember that sacrifice and bring before God the offerings of our love and lives in a new, more personal way.

A priest is also a figure of leadership guiding the faithful and reaching out to outsiders, although the rest of us should also be involved in that.

One other part of our reading from Hebrews intrigued me. It talks of Jesus as a son who learned obedience from what he suffered. In his time on Earth he was heard to offer up prayers and pleadings to his heavenly Father. The concept of Jesus having to learn, having to grapple with his role in humanity, until he was made perfect, links again to the suffering servant image.

So how do you view Jesus as leader? He certainly showed by example how to serve others. He helps us to understand God better through his words and actions. He encourages us to have a closer and deeper relationship with God. He encourages us to take responsibility for our lives, but has also helped us to deal with things when they go wrong....when we go wrong. He wants us to take responsibility and be independent, but rooted in Him. He showed understanding and forgiveness and encouraged his followers to live better. He challenges us sometimes to look at the world and ourselves differently, even to be willing to look at God in a fresh way.

We can look at his sacrifice and identify it as being for all of humanity. His leadership is certainly often different from what the world expects.

We have to remember that a leader without followers is of little value. Our response to Jesus as our leader is important. We have to reflect his values, his love, and his view of the world. That isn't always easy, but we share his cup and can taste of both his sacrifice and his glory.