

A Reflection on Jesus's Leadership

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What qualities do we look for in a good leader? How can we become better leaders ourselves? Thinking Faith invited Thomas Shufflebotham SJ to guide us in a prayerful reflection on just three of the innumerable qualities of Jesus that any good Christian leader should seek to emulate.

It is striking that in the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius attaches virtually no adjectives to Jesus. He seems content to have us watch the Lord's actions and ponder some of his words, but for the most part he leaves it to us to imagine the characteristics and qualities of Christ as we are moved to do so: that is to say, he leaves it to us and the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, one could go on forever naming qualities and facets of Jesus Christ as he passes through the pages of the gospels.¹ The compilers of the Litanies of the Holy Name and of the Sacred Heart were not short of ideas. Many of those adjectives have a bearing on his leadership.

For now, I want to pick out from the plethora of possibilities three attributes of Jesus which seem to me to be central to Christian leadership, three Christ-centred approaches which I suspect Ignatius might stress were he to walk through the door into our century and its challenges.

Authenticity

First, I suggest **authenticity** and what it implies: honesty, truthfulness, integrity, or – a word favoured by Ignatius – probity.

Jesus teaches by word and example, and what he says and does are in perfect harmony with who he is. Jesus is truth, Jesus tells the truth and, while he may not

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distance himself from hypocrites, the gospels time and again show him distancing himself from hypocrisy. He does not twist or manipulate the truth.

President Eisenhower claimed that 'the supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity'. More informally, the jazz musician Charlie Parker said, 'If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn'.

With words that still speak volumes to us today, Pope Paul VI wrote in 1975: 'Especially in regard to young people it is said that they have a horror of the artificial or false and that they are searching above all for truth and honesty.'²

Forty years on, it is even clearer that manipulating or stifling the truth can do immense harm, both because it does not work and because it is a contradiction of Christianity. It is not the way of Jesus. It rings true when Jesus says, 'If your eye is clear, your whole body will be filled with light' (Matt 6: 22).

Jesus's gaze is on God, he refers all to the Father; his leadership therefore is not self-regarding. His disciples and companions, too, will be true and honest if they focus on God rather than self. That will require sincere prayer, prayer in which we give God the freedom to show us the opposite of what suits our convenience, the freedom to shatter our preferences. And, to use an Ignatian word, the heart of our prayer needs to be conversation or *colloquy* that is sincere: I need to be willing to look God in the eye, to meet God's gaze.

When Peter cures a cripple he tells him, 'In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk' (Acts 3:6; earlier, perhaps, he might have been tempted to garner the credit). Likewise, the Christian community always gathers in the name of Jesus, not in its own name. A Christian community that does not focus on Jesus soon begins to become its own master, to use others for its own convenience and to descend into hypocrisy: it is not authentic.

Jesus breathes dignity, but without seeking it. He attracted his companions with honesty, not by concealing the challenges but by stating them clearly. 'Whoever does the truth comes out into the light, so that what he is doing may plainly appear as done in God' (Jn 3:21).

Walking on in faith

A second approach to leadership that Jesus elicits from his followers and companions could be summed up as **walking on in faith**. That is implying that as we keep step with Christ we gaze ahead, but without ignoring or downplaying the past; and all in a spirit of faith and courage, imitating Jesus who, says Luke, 'resolutely turned his face towards Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51).

Jesus revered the Law and the prophets; at the Transfiguration he is seen conversing with Moses and Elijah³: he comes to fulfil the Law. Even after the Resurrection his followers are still treasuring Israel's heritage. But Jesus also speaks of new wine and new wineskins.

The risen Lord challenges the travellers on the road to Emmaus to draw inspiration from their tradition, but also to walk with him into the future: 'So slow to believe all that the prophets have said! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer - before entering into his glory?' (Luke 24:26).

His disciple Peter looks backwards to the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and the Resurrection event, and he preaches out of past experience: 'We are witnesses', he says, 'of everything that he did'. But that same faith and respect for the tradition leads Peter to accept the new vision for the future which the Holy Spirit begins to show him at the house of a Gentile centurion. (Acts 10:1-48) To Simon Bar-Jonah

some years earlier, it would have been unthinkable, and in any case he would have lacked the courage. Peter's leadership had to imbibe courage from his leader, Jesus. St Bernard summed it up neatly when he described the Church as, *Ecclesia ante et retro occulata*: the Church must have eyes for what is ahead and what is past.

Jesus's leadership was infectious once the Spirit was given to the infant church, and [Acts of the Apostles](#) shows us his disciples walking courageously the thin line of fidelity to tradition combined with fidelity to the Spirit urging them into new paths. Either component could land them in persecution and vicious criticism. Holding to both – the old and the new – could be a crucifixion.

The compassion of Christ

I suggest that a third key also is necessary: **the compassion of Christ**. With authenticity and faith alone we can be impressive but impossible to live with. Being genuine *companions* implies this extra dimension, this third key, this love infused with empathy. When it is applied to choices, decisions, policy, it becomes Ignatius's discerning love: *discreta caritas*.

In this, our inspiration is the example of Christ just as the grace of Christ is our strength, and he challenges us to 'Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate' (Luke 6:36).

A model for this compassion is found in Paul's rhapsody on love in 1 Corinthians. As we read it we could imagine it as spoken to us – as of course it is:

And now I'm going to show you a way that is even more outstanding. If I speak in the languages of human beings and of angels, but do not have love, then I have turned into a sounding brass or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and I know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have complete faith, so as to move mountains, but have no love, I am nothing. And if I divide all my possessions into bits, and if I hand over my body in order that I may boast, but do not have love, I am not helped in any way.

Love waits patiently, shows kindness. Love is not jealous, does not brag, is not 'puffed up', does not behave improperly, does not seek self-interest, doesn't get provoked, doesn't reckon up

evil, doesn't rejoice at injustice, but rejoices at integrity.

Love copes with everything; is always committed, always hopeful, always endures to the end; love never collapses (1 Cor 12:31 – 13:8).

Commenting on this, his own translation of the passage, Nicholas King SJ writes: 'this "solution" to the problems of Corinth could also be read as Paul's portrait of his beloved Jesus Christ. With Paul it always comes back to Jesus'.⁴ And for companions of Jesus, too, it must always come back to Jesus.

God's compassion, incarnate in Jesus, embraces the crowd. He had compassion on the multitude (Mark 6:34) and he longed and longed to gather Jerusalem and her children together as a hen gathers her chicks; he died 'to gather together into one the scattered children of God' (John 11:52), having prayed beforehand 'that they may all be one' (John 17:21).

And equally, that compassion embraces the individual, be it the woman at Simon's feast, or a leper, or a poor widow, or a rich young man; indeed every human being with a heart open to accept it.

The characteristic backdrop for Jesus's leadership is not an auditorium or a parade-ground, but a meal. When he imparts leadership to Peter it is in the imagery of shepherding: a preference for the intimate and the personal touch rather than dragooning.

Jesus's style of leadership – a style without a style – vaults over the centuries and addresses the needs of our time. Nowhere is this more evident than in his attitude to women. Dorothy L. Sayers remarks,

[Women] had never known a man like this Man – there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised ... who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension ... never urged them to be feminine, or jeered at them for being female; with no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend.⁵

Mary Ward, Mary McAleese, Elizabeth II: none of them have had much power exactly, but they have exercised leadership, and it is clear that in large measure Christ's attitude and values are their model.

What makes Jesus's leadership and example so powerful is that his compassion runs so deep that it is inseparable from a spirit of *service*. A British Army general, Sir John Glubb, said he was convinced that the key to leadership lay in this gospel text: 'The greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves ... here am I among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:26).

Because Jesus serves without seeking power, he himself empowers, he sets free others' potential. The Good Shepherd is the one who has come that they may have life and have it to the full. The one who can claim, 'I am the light of the world' also says, 'You are light for the world'. Jesus's own summary blends compassion with apostolic mission: 'Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor...' (Lk 7:20-22).

The demands of Christian leadership are high, but we will come closer to meeting them if we are people preoccupied with the *compassion* of Christ, speaking with the *honesty* of Christ, in a *spirit of faith* enlivened by our contemplation of Christ steadfastly walking towards Jerusalem, the city from which later he would send his disciples out on mission in the service of all nations. However, any Christian leader will do well to remember one thing more: in the scriptures the Kingdom of God is not built up by human beings. It grows from the soil below, watered by the Spirit, and it is given from above: *de arriba* – 'all is grace'.

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¹ A note on my references to the gospels: I will be quoting from all four gospels, and do so with an appreciation that the evangelists each have distinct theological slants and are not to be treated simply as biographers.

² *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §76

³ Mark 9:2-8; Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36

⁴ Nicholas King, *The New Testament* (Kevin Mayhew, 2004), p. 380.

⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Are Women Human?' (1947).