

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick by Vaughan S Roberts
Warwick District Council Civic Service 2014 (Trinity 1)

Matthew 10: 24-31

Welcome to St Mary's and this special *moment* of thanksgiving and prayer – a moment in the year when we can bring our community before God, giving thanks for all that God's placed into our trust and praying for God's blessing upon all our endeavours as we seek to serve our locality. It's wonderful to have Councillor Clare Sawdon and so many civic representatives here this morning.

But how does this special moment in June 2014 relate to that other moment that we've just heard about in our reading from St Matthew's Gospel? Do sayings about Beelzebul, about not keeping secrets and about the apparently small value of sparrows have much to do with the challenges of our world – as we face so much war and conflict, difficult economic and political decisions, not to mention an early and ignominious exit by England from the World Cup?

Although the distance between our circumstances in Britain now and those in the Holy Land 2000 years ago may seem to be a chasm, humanity is still much the same. So, as we eavesdrop upon Jesus at this moment of his ministry, we can see being played out: issues of social conflict and petty name-calling (*If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.*) Questions about honesty and integrity (*nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.*) And the subject of value and true worth, when Jesus says: *do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

All of those concerns remain with us and we can see locally, nationally and internationally what happens when name-calling moves to the next level; when issues of private and public probity are ignored; and the challenges all societies face if people feel they have no self-worth. The questions Jesus was addressing in that moment with his disciples are ones which haven't gone away but remain with us – sometimes in very stark and painful ways. But is there something more for us now from that moment of teaching and preparation? After all Jesus is about to send his disciples out into a world that, at times, will be hostile and unreceptive. Is there something for us in our working lives? Our daily lives? Our social lives?

In her book *Rethinking Leadership* (Edward Elgar, 2010) Professor Donna Ladkin describes what she calls 'The Leadership Moment' and it seems to me that there's significant common ground between what she's writing about and what we've heard in this morning's gospel reading. Now if anyone's thinking: But I'm not a leader – I'd urge you to stay with me. Not many get to head up a large organization but many of us do offer some form of leadership in the workplace, in the home, even amongst friends or a social group.

Ladkin argues that a leadership moment is the space between four points, which she pictures as a diamond. At the four points of the diamond, moving clockwise, we have: 'leader,' 'purpose,' follower' and 'context'. Marking out a space where these elements all interact at key moments of decision and we can see that happening our Gospel story.

We're at a leadership moment in the ministry of Jesus as he prepares his disciples to go out and take his message of how God's Kingdom's being revealed. We have the 'leader'

describing the ‘purpose’ for his group of ‘followers’ and setting out the context – the four points on the diamond.

And notice how Jesus sets out two horizons for his disciples’ context. The first horizon is local – some people, he says, will demonstrate their antipathy towards you and call you names. In effect, he says: that’s a given and we’ve experienced it already. But he’s also placing a far horizon before his followers as he says – again, in effect – God cares for you, down to your finger nails and the hairs on your head and you’re never absent from that Divine love and concern whatever happens. And that’s the much broader context for this leadership moment, so he’s urging his followers not to take their eyes off the far distance as they set about the purpose that he’s given them, within the near horizon.

But there’s one more important thing in this leadership moment. When Jesus says: *A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master.* He’s making a clear statement about how he sees the relationship between ‘leader’ and ‘follower’ (as we might say now). Just going back to Donna Ladkin, in describing the dynamic of the leadership moment, she observes how leadership doesn’t necessarily rest with one person but can *revolve* around a group or rest with different *people* for different *tasks*. Jesus isn’t quite saying that *here* but he is making a statement about equality and inclusiveness – essentially: We’re all in this together! An insight that still has a great deal of resonance for us today.

So where does this leave us? Let me conclude with three brief observations. The first thing is: I’m not arguing Jesus was a management guru who was 2,000 years ahead of his time. But it is worth keeping in mind that not all wisdom is new. Knowledge is new but wisdom has often been around a long time and sometimes it just needs to be re-discovered. The faiths and religions of our community can often be valuable repositories of profound wisdom if we’re willing, as a society, to listen. Jesus often drew upon the inherited wisdom of Judaism, whilst at the same time challenging listeners to look again at the nature of the God.

Second, in our contexts of work and family, friends and society we’re all, at one time or another, leaders and followers. We will be in those leadership moments sharing vision and purpose, or being asked to respond to someone else’s prompting and encouragement. The biggest challenge of course is when someone thinks we’ve misread the context or we think someone else has misunderstood the situation to which we’re responding. But understanding the dynamics in which we’re caught up can be an important step in resolving such difficulties, as Jesus and other wise teachers have often recognised.

And finally, Jesus poses a crucial question for us: what is our far horizon? Whatever organization we serve or whatever our family or social setting, there will be the kind of local horizon we saw Jesus outlining to his disciples. But he also outlined a far horizon. For Jesus it was God’s Kingdom where all are valued, all are equal, all are held in God’s love and keeping. When we’re caught up in leadership moments ... or bogged down in the routine moments of the day ... it’s important to be able to look to a far horizon and say: that’s where we’re going and that’s what’s truly of *worth*. And in this moment – today, now –we can celebrate the farthest horizon ... God the creator and sustainer of all.