

EDITORIAL: LOOKING TO JESUS FOR STRENGTH

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Christian leadership can be a draining business – even for the strongest of ‘characters’. It involves a constant self-giving to other people – whether through preaching, through counselling, through empathising with people as they go through the crises of life, of whether through the general ‘wear and tear’ of giving leadership. To survive Christian leaders sometimes need to be incredibly resilient – in the words of a recent book on ‘the personal qualities of a priest’, they need to be ‘Steel Angels’.¹ How necessary therefore it is for leaders to look to Jesus for spiritual renewal; to open up ourselves to his life-giving and life-sustaining presence; and to so ‘abide in him’ that the branches draw fresh sap from the vine. Only in this can new strength be found to love and service.

John Perry, a former Bishop of Chelmsford, made the insightful comment: “The hardest lesson to accept and learn about Christian leadership is that it has to be in God’s strength and not our own. Other qualifications for leadership are necessary, but the primary qualification is a recognition that God’s work has to be done in his way and with his power. This cuts across the accepted attitude, ‘I can do this in my own strength’.”²

Ministry can often be sustained in the first few years by natural talent. But there comes a point when natural talent no longer suffices. Indeed, natural talent can prove a stumbling-block to the operation of God’s power in our lives. Sometimes it takes a real crisis in ministry to realise that the true source of power is in our utter dependence on Christ. This was certainly the experience of the Apostle Paul. When tormented almost to the point of distraction by his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12.7), he discovered the truth of the risen Christ: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12.9). The Apostle’s weakness was a condition of his experiencing God’s power. Self-confidence only acts as a block to the source of divine power.

In other words, when we speak about developing character, it is always in relation to Christ. Strength to lead and minister in Christ’s name is found in Christ alone. Our own resources are finite, his are infinite. This was the experience of Carlo Caretto, who described how God made him face up to his inadequacy and his need of power greater than his own: “Now I contrast my powerlessness with the powerfulness of God, the heap of my sins with the completeness of his mercy. And I place the abyss of my smallness beneath the abyss of his greatness. God can do everything and I can do nothing, but if I offer this nothing in prayer to God, everything becomes possible to me.”³

Strength is needed in time of weakness. Strength is also needed in time of temptation. As with all God’s people, the temptations that afflict leaders can be many and various. For instance, ‘success’ in ministry can be a leader’s downfall. According to C.H. Spurgeon, “Success exposes a man to the pressures of people and thus tempts him to hold on to his gains by means of fleshly methods and practices, and to let himself be ruled wholly by the dictatorial demands of incessant expansion. Success can go to my head and will unless I remember that it is God who accomplishes the work, that he can continue to do without my help, and that he will be able to make out with other means whenever he wants to cut me out.” In such circumstances leaders need to look to Jesus for strength to remain humble and faithful.

¹ Magdalen Smith, *Steel Angels* (SPCK, London 2014).

² John Perry, *Christian Leadership* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1983) 10-11.

³ Carlo Caretto, *Letters from the Desert*.

Equally demanding are those occasions when ‘success’ does not appear to accompany our ministry. The temptation is then to look around, and in looking around become jealous of others. Indeed, in many ways jealousy seems to be the ministerial sin par excellence. Michael Ramsey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote that jealousy “is a poison which spreads more easily than you would think. You can be jealous of a man because he has gifts which you would like. You can be jealous of a man because while you think he lacks your gifts, he seems to be more successful than you. You can be jealous of a man because some of the people look to him when you thought of them as *your* people looking to you for spiritual help. In this case your love for people, through its intensity of feeling, can make you jealous, as you think of them as *your* people. Thus complex are the elements which create pastoral jealousy.”⁴ All the more reason, therefore, to look to Jesus for strength to serve.

⁴ Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today* (SPCK, London 2nd edition 1985) 71-72. See also Paul Beasley-Murray, *Living Out the Call. Book One: Living for God's Glory* (Amazon 2015, 71-79).who looks at how pastors can be guilty of all seven ‘deadly’ sins: viz. pride, envy, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony and sloth!