FEAR AND TRUST

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God-centred leadership

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To Jackie
a God-centred leader
and to all who are calling from the walls

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1

Surviving leaders

On a journey beyond certainty

Questions that do not have an answer need to be asked very slowly. Ann Michaels

What were we doing before we discovered 'leadership'? Does anyone remember? The questions surfaced as I drove away from yet another training event devoted to the subject.

'Leadership' is now at the top of the agenda of organizations and businesses. Type the word into any internet search engine and you will see what I mean. Advisers, consultants and training courses are everywhere. 'Leadership studies' feature prominently in the curriculum of education establishments, while in the Church, no region or denomination is now without its own 'leadership course'. We are probably close to initiative overload, but I, for one, am very grateful. As a consultant and trainer, I have benefited significantly from this awakening of interest!

Brave and creative though much of the thinking is, deep anxieties are evident too. There is talk of a 'crisis of leadership' in our world, partly because it is so easy to feel let down by those we choose to lead us when answers to urgent questions prove elusive. And an obsessive focus on 'leaders' can have a debilitating effect upon those working with or under them. When I talk to people in the worlds of local government, health care, education, national charities and the Church, I know that many are feeling bruised by the way organizational change is being managed. Driving for results or struggling for survival

can have a demoralizing impact upon even the most resourceful people.

Then again, the burden of expectation upon leaders is huge. I also listen to people who are working bravely and imaginatively to offer leadership in communities and organizations, but who are experiencing significant resistance, frustrating patterns of dependency and unwillingness to take responsibility. *Being led* is as much of an issue in our context as leading – possibly more so.

Of course, every generation faces its own challenges and these are thoroughly testing times – economically, socially and spiritually. But why now the focus on leadership? How did we come to believe that this is what we need?

When life is confusing, language can help give the impression of control: 'When we give a thing a name we imagine we have got hold of it' (Lane 1998: 62). In the Church of England, for example, the shift to 'leadership' from more traditional role descriptions coincided with the hugely exciting but deeply divisive decision to ordain women as priests. Whatever the intention, at the very moment that women began to minister in full priestly partnership, the task was renamed and the focus redefined by a noun borrowed from organizational worlds habitually dominated by men.

Leadership theorists have long observed how Western approaches to leadership, both secular and spiritual, are essentially 'heroic' in mode: great men (and just occasionally women) rise to the fore in times of crisis. They inspire, solve the 'problem' and achieve goals on behalf of everyone else. But note that 'heroic leadership', by definition, *requires* everyone else to be helpless. 'At its heart the traditional view of leadership is based on assumptions of people's powerlessness, their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only by a few great leaders' (Nirenberg 1993: 340). Leader and led exist here in a thoroughly unhealthy co-dependent relationship.

More recent studies on leadership, including those exploring gender and leadership, have been asking what *post*-heroic leadership might look like. Here the focus shifts to what is found within, and is expressive of, the whole community, rather than on something imported from outside. The talk is of 'shared leadership', 'leadership in community', 'servant leadership', and communities are seen as 'leader-full' – as relational, communal, non-directive, collaborative and negotiated in style.

These insights feature in the more reflective approaches to leadership training around the country, though there is still much frustration at how slow senior leadership styles are to move away from a hierarchy/patronage model. While the Church of England's approach has been changing, it may be that an institution that has traditionally chosen its senior leaders through a secretive system it calls 'preferment' will always struggle with the consultative, collaborative transparency that post-heroic leadership aspires to.

This book began to come together when I was invited to run some workshops on the Bible and leadership. I said 'yes', but in all honesty I was weary of the subject and not convinced about the way that the Bible was commonly used in addressing it. Seeking a fresh way in, I leafed through parts of the Old Testament and found myself unexpectedly gripped by the account of a defining period in the history of ancient Israel. It tells of a people journeying from a tribal confederacy, with fierce and distinctive loyalties, to the beginning of a monarchy and the struggle to grow into one nation under king and God.

What a remarkable amount the story of 1 and 2 Samuel has in common with our own! We too are in transition from long familiar securities, and going through considerable social upheaval. We too have a preoccupation with 'leadership' as a way of securing the future. Driven by similar concerns, the elders of Israel decide that what they need is a king like the nations around them (1 Sam. 8.4–5). It is a strategy that brings its successes for Israel but it also results in some catastrophic

failures and violent unrest. Like our times, theirs were marked by hope and despair, faith and doubt, loyalty and betrayal.

We struggle with the place of God in our midst, but it was no easier to do faith or theology in ancient Israel. Men, women and communities were endeavouring to find meaning in the complex stories shaping their destiny then, as we are now.

Both worlds are affected by the uneven partnership of women and men in a patriarchal society. Ancient Israel is, of course, the more conservative in this respect. How startling then to find that as 1 and 2 Samuel unfolds, it is again and again the initiative, wisdom or simply the presence of a woman that confronts or changes the prevailing script and opens the story to new possibilities – though always at a cost. As John Bell (1996) observes, 'When it comes to chauvinism, to the procuring of women for sexual purposes, to unbridled male power and to biased reporting of events in favour of men, the Bible is as good a source as any.' For its time, 1 and 2 Samuel is very subversive literature.

But what makes this text so significant is not so much the story it tells as *the way it tells it*. Nations at this time tended to cast their history in the form of epic poems. But here we find *post-heroic storytelling* – honest, subtle, non-triumphalist and undefensive. The Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann calls this kind of text 'survival literature' because by abandoning familiar ways of relating and describing what is going on, it becomes a subversive story with the capacity to liberate. It frees us to imagine ourselves, our own life and meaning, in radically new and adventurous ways.

Who first transcribed 1 and 2 Samuel is not known. It is highly probable that the earliest versions were written soon after the time of King David (approximately tenth century BCE). However, it has clearly gone through a number of revisions and evolved in the telling, even during the time of exile after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the mass deportations to Babylon nearly 400 years later. Somewhere in the process it became too

long to go on one scroll – hence its two-volume format. Though the completion of the 'official' Hebrew text (called the Masoretic text) dates from between the seventh and tenth centuries CE, an earlier complete version exists, and extracts found among the Dead Sea scrolls appear to draw on even earlier texts which have not survived. The English Bible versions (themselves a matter of bewildering choice) are based not only on these Hebrew texts but on a wide variety of sources in Greek, Latin, Syriac and Jewish Aramaic. Reading the Bible is a highly exploratory art, and translation, like history, involves interpretation.

My approach in this book is to quote, unless otherwise stated, from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), one of the most reliable of the modern English Bible translations. For a more lively paraphrase, readers might try *The Message* (2007), which does not assume much knowledge of the original Bible text. When relating a story or incident I have tried to provide enough detail to set the scene and background, and I regularly give chapter and verse references in brackets (but please feel free to ignore these if they are a distraction).

Storytelling in any culture is a very precise art. In the ancient world, stories were originally spoken not written, and the sound of the words and their repetition is important. This is easily lost in translation, so where an important play on words seems to have been missed or has not been spelled out in the NRSV, I have used Robert Alter's translation in his *The David Story* (1999) as an alternative. The bracketed Bible reference is followed by 'Alter', for example, '1 Sam. 3.14, Alter'.

A different kind of storytelling invites us to adopt different ways of listening to Scripture. Christian communities find the attraction of the 'heroic' hard to resist and this colours how the Bible is heard and preached. We come expecting something directive and well defined. But storytelling in the Bible tends to 'show' rather than 'tell' us things. It *presents* rather than *expounds* or *declares* a story. So events happen, people (and God) do things, but the drama is very sparing about their motives

and feelings. You have to work these out through their words and deeds (Goldingay 2000: 132). Rather like an open theatre production that relies on audience participation, storytelling in the Bible requires communal reading and exploration.

The narrator of 1 and 2 Samuel certainly encourages us to become involved. He seems comfortable to be speaking of deep matters, of things that will take time to consider and that may not provide the answers we think we most need. He appears to be remarkably free of any obligation to explain or resolve issues raised by events or to persuade us of the rightness of a particular point of view. As he weaves his narrative, he often draws on conflicting sources, without attempting to reconcile them. Politics, personality, power and theology are all factors in this story of a society journeying unevenly through change. The style is more often contemplative than didactic, reflective than prescriptive, participative than directive. It is even playful at times and the narrator has a teasing way of making comments that could be taken one of a number of ways. The listener is often left wondering quite what to make of things. Events sometimes jump out of chronological sequence without explanation, while the length of any particular story is not necessarily a clue to its significance. Very often the drama turns on a brief appearance or the action or words of an unnamed character in the wings. All in all, it does indeed feel more like joining in a lively conversation than reading the Bible!

What a contrast to the preached and 'taught' approaches to Bible storytelling familiar in many churches. The assumption tends to be made that something authoritative must be directive. But to claim that 'the Bible teaches . . .' also requires us to ask *in what way* it teaches.

I was reflecting on this as I spoke at the Lee Abbey centre in north Devon one holiday week. After each address I invited any who wished to talk further to meet me in the library, and an unexpectedly large number came each day. They were a very mixed group, and included a number of people who had given

up a once lively Christian commitment. Rather than adopt a question-and-answer format, I kept passing their ideas and insights back into the group. A conversation developed that was marked by high levels of honesty and a willingness to listen and respond to very varied insights. We circled around the biblical texts, weaving our own stories in and out of them: we were often more alive in the questions than the 'answers', and for many, those conversations became the highlight of the week. They felt like an experience of community doing theology through storytelling – the stories of the Bible and our own. Faith grew afresh for some and in others was awakened for the first time.

I have found the work of psychologist James Fowler very helpful in reflecting on the different ways people and groups tell their faith stories in the changing contexts they find themselves in. What interested him was not *what* we believe but *how*, and of his six stages of faith development, two have particular relevance for this discussion (see Runcorn 2011: 109ff. for a fuller summary).

The first, which Fowler locates most commonly in early adulthood but may continue well into later life, has been called the 'tribal' or 'loyalist'. It is characterized by loyalty to given ways of believing, and faith communities of this type tend to be gatherings of the 'like-minded'. The tribal stage has many impressive qualities: beliefs and values are deeply held and levels of commitment impressive. Allegiance is to external authorities – 'the leader', the Bible, 'the organization' or 'The Party'. Leadership in such communities tends towards the authoritative, directive and functionally non-consultative. Teaching styles will favour the directive and prescriptive. Right and wrong will be sharply defined, choices clear. Those at the tribal stage will be drawn to the heroic.

In anxious or chaotic times there are powerful attractions in tribal faith. But because it is so tightly bounded and defined, it is not good at responding creatively to significantly changing

environments. It tends to lack the reflective depth and flexibility needed to cope with the challenges of *long-term* transformation and can be very defensive and aggressive under threat. Paul Virilio, the author of *Speed and Politics*, could be describing tribal behaviour when he observes that a great deal of the organizational response to crisis and corporate anxiety in our time is coercive and even violent in its approach. It attempts to achieve change 'by the exercise of power' (Brewin 2004: 6), to go for pragmatic, short-term solutions that lack the depth needed to engage with the sheer complexity of the task. Similar tendencies may be evident in approaches to church strategy.

The other stage has been called 'critic' and 'reflective', which as the names imply is a thoughtful and questioning stage. It may be triggered at any time (though mid-life is particularly common) by a crisis of some sort that shatters the sense of security we may have had regarding our beliefs, causing us to lose our tribal certainties and question previous convictions. Discovering to our cost that truth is more complex than we first thought, we will feel the need to move away from a world in which life is promised and faith and God come with some kind of guarantees. This can be a painful, lonely and bewildering stage to enter. It is a kind of exile.

On the positive side, the reflective critic approach can be spacious and exploratory, open to questions without demanding answers. Those at this stage will develop the capacity to hold together diverse views, to live with contradiction and to weave together the ever-transitional stories of life. They will be drawn to mystery. To a tribal/loyalist community this can look very individualistic, but the reflective critic has come to own faith or life for herself and having done so will be able to contribute richly to quite new patterns of belonging and believing.

Though often read and interpreted with a tribal agenda, 1 and 2 Samuel is actually an example of reflective storytelling. It has a depth that only becomes apparent through long, slow

listening. Strikingly undefended and non-campaigning, the narrative handles the volatile themes of politics, theology and personality and offers profound reflections on the remaking of a people, a faith and their world. It is storytelling by the wise and 'shows' a way of doing God, doing faith and doing history for any age or people who find themselves journeying through prolonged and uncertain transition. It actually models for us a way of leading, and of being led, and of seeking God in all.

In short, it traces the vulnerable but essential journey from fear to trust.