

Jesus and Authentic Leadership

A national leader is accused of deceiving the electorate when he abandons key policies that contributed to his previous electoral success, because “circumstances have changed”.

An opposition leader admits to a television interviewer that not everything he says is the “Gospel truth” and implies that those who wish to know what he stands for should read the fine print in his party’s carefully scripted press releases.

A champion football team is humiliated by forfeiting two national premierships and incurring a hefty fine and other sanctions because it egregiously breaks salary rules.

Business leaders admit to shareholders that they have fudged profit data to keep taxes down and stocks high, while banks face a class action suit for “punitively” over-charging customers.

Failure of leadership, or “business as usual”?

Are the above (true) scenarios simply cultural issues, or are they symptomatic of some of the great moral failures of this (and every other) generation? In the final analysis, where do the protagonists and their followers end up?

We hear a great deal about “effective leadership”. There is no shortage of courses, conferences, books, DVDs, “how-to” manuals and websites on the spectrum of becoming better leaders. “Positive leadership” (meet Dr Martin Seligman, Director of the University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Centre) is having a great (and arguably well-deserved) run, in response to the weariness of people the world over with negative or manipulative leadership, combined with disappointment that leaders who promise much often have little to deliver.

Not that one hears much about “effective followership”. My spell-checking tool tells me there is no such word as “followership” - but there should be. Every leader needs to be following someone.

I am leader of a team whose collective work ultimately impacts thousands of clients every year. I take my leadership responsibilities very seriously. I am under no illusion that I can do the entire job myself, or that I have all the requisite wisdom. As I direct, strategize, delegate, respond to issues and manage tasks up and down the line I am challenged by the awesome responsibilities associated with leading the lives of men and women who depend to a large extent for their job satisfaction and work outcomes on the way I do so and the atmosphere I create. This is humbling. It is why I ask God every day for wisdom, favour, ideas and His blessing and protection. I know that I cannot afford to be false, manipulative or uncaring. God sees my heart. Others see a lot as well.

Jesus Christ was a leader, if ever there was one. He had a lot to say about authentic leadership. We need to understand the principles He taught and take them back into our day-to-day work and family arenas.

Jesus, Leaders and “Sheep”

Much of the content of Jesus’ teaching was drawn from daily life in his time. Growing up around Middle Eastern shepherds, he likened men and women to sheep, in terms of the needs and decisions they faced, and the search for a secure “place” to find protection against storms and predators.

No one likes to be called a “sheep”. The term sounds pejorative. Sheep are “dumb”, aren’t they? They blindly follow other sheep. They belong to a “mob” and typically don’t think for themselves. Their lives are short, sharp and seemingly meaningless: they eat grass, produce wool that others peremptorily take from them and then die, due to disease, being ravaged by wolves or dingoes, or end up on the dinner table. However, Jesus had another view. He saw sheep (and people) as individuals, thriving on relationships, needing to be able to trust those they follow, and doing so if the circumstances are right. Try to force them to go one way, against their will, and they will run away.

Facing down his strongest opponents in Jerusalem, in the lead-up to his betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus drew on the shepherd/sheep analogy to test the attitudes of those who came to Him: those who made life-long commitments to follow Him; and those who felt threatened and sought to put Him out of business. John records one such encounter in Chapter 10 of his Gospel account. Jesus’ comments in this passage have a lot to say about personal relationships and the nature of leadership, whether in the family, church, work, or more broadly in the community.

Bearing in mind that those who confronted Jesus in the passage cited were fundamentally antagonistic to His mission, his response is challenging and contains lessons for all of us, especially those who lead teams. Consider the following.

1. Those who rely on “back door” access to leadership roles and management of people cannot be trusted

“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.”

Jesus’ comment at this point is quite confronting.

Going through the front door poses logistical problems for some would-be leaders. The front door is too obvious, too meritocratic, too much of a leveller; that’s the way everyone else goes in. So, they look for the back door, the short-cut, people in power who can give them a “leg up”. Jesus called such people “thieves and robbers”. Instead of approaching people and problems in a transparent way they come in through the side window, like burglars (Jude verse 3 is instructive here - in fact the Greek language uses the same analogy).

All too often, leaders depend on behind-the-scenes politics and “deals” to get what they want. They gain positions of power and influence, but not enduring confidence. They consider it a matter of honour to be known as “a numbers man” or a “toe cutter”. Those closest to them know they cannot be trusted (there are no true friends in politics), so they are wary of committing themselves, unless they stand to gain some of the benefits - then they become complicit. This occurs in business, politics, even religious organisations and families; anywhere hierarchies and power structures are located. Candidates for pre-selection in election campaigns are often forced on local branches because they have close links to national leadership or funding sources. Christian organisations, and their cliques and dynasties, are not immune. What I find scary is that those who live like this often do not perceive any ethical conflicts.

If there are burglars in the house, whom do *you* trust? How can you be sure those who lead or follow you are not self-seekers simply interested in what they can extract from the relationship? I believe Jesus is warning all of us to be careful.

2. Authentic leadership enters through the front door

“The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him.”

For the genuine man or woman of God there is no need for secret agendas, no cabals or behind-the-scenes deals (see Acts 26:26). Their lives are open, accountable, as transparent as possible; what you see is what you get. They believe that God opens and closes doors according to His will

“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” (2 Corinthians 3:2, 3).

Authentic leadership is “who we are”, not the “spin” we sometimes put on our circumstances and relationships. Such leadership is not common, but it is what the majority of followers crave.

3. Everyone needs leadership

“The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

For millennia, Eastern shepherds have walked ahead of their sheep. When I lived in the Middle East I studied Bedouin shepherds in Jordan, who walked well-worn trails with small flocks of sheep in their wake, sitting with them in the cool of the day, leading them by pools of water, treating them tenderly, calling them by name and speaking to them, as a father would a group of small children. At the end of the day they would lead them home to shelter from the elements. Bedouin shepherds love their sheep.

Everyone needs good leadership. Everyone needs heroes, people to believe in, to follow, to adopt as credible life models.

The authentic shepherd goes ahead of the sheep. He (or she) does not bark orders, but asks the flock to go where he has already gone. People respect leaders who are prepared to empathize and get their hands dirty, do the hard yards and speak from experience, not just articulate aspirational targets or theory. This is the leap from action planning to action. Followers respect integrity. They shy away from leaders who do not “walk the talk”.

Good leadership is paramount. Everyone needs effective, constructive, confident, communicative, godly leadership. Students and street vendors need leadership. So do Prime Ministers, community organisers and business leaders.

4. People (“sheep”) are much more discerning than many leaders realise and do not easily follow leaders they do not know

“But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”

The trap for those involved in leadership is avoiding what has loosely been called the “hero syndrome”, where the accolades of others get inside our heads, where they reside, echoing in our inner chambers. Heroes are important, but when we begin to think we are heroes it can subtly convince and then destroy us.

This is when we start to believe that we have all the answers for everybody and are indispensable, when we believe our own rhetoric. Jesus said we should be careful when everyone appears to speak well of us (Luke 6:26). People and circumstances change, as easily as the direction of the wind.

The best of leaders cannot meet everyone's expectations; they disappoint their followers from time to time. I have found that, when this happens, only leadership relationships that are based on integrity endure the hard knocks and harsh reverses. False and calculating leadership gets caught out. Leaders who are not prepared to admit mistakes forfeit the trust of others. When we need to be liked and appreciated to feel validated, lack of support, indifference, or criticism on the part of others can undermine us. When the recognition and approval of our friends, family members and work colleagues are all consuming, we become blinded to what is really important, and durable. The tragic thing is that some heroes do not realise others do not esteem and need them as much as they think. Negative feedback ends up eroding their confidence and undermining the leadership they aspire to model.

"Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them."

Why didn't the leaders of Jesus' day understand His anecdote? Ironically, some were so ensconced in the political and religious systems of their day that they simply did not grasp His message. It didn't dawn on them that He was speaking about them. Or they were so filled with pride, presumption and prejudice that the truth did not penetrate the shells they had constructed around themselves. It is easy for leaders to believe they have the skillsets and knowledge to do the job, but not be self-aware enough to realise that they are being high-jacked by their own rhetoric.

The Pharisees were "experts" in the law, which they used to justify narrow pettiness and judgemental attitudes. The Sadducees were close to the political power structures in Jerusalem, which they leveraged to their advantage. Neither party was ready for an outsider like Jesus to challenge the status quo and highlight their bankrupt spirituality. In their hearts they had already rejected His message; some were active members of a conspiracy to arrest and execute Him. Their response was to call him mad, or demon possessed, and make every endeavour to undermine His message and ministry. Getting rid of Jesus was like taking the irritating stone out of their shoes.

Jesus is our shepherd (1 Peter 2:25). The religious leaders of His day were not His "sheep". By choice. They did not belong to Him. So they opposed Him.

4. Good Shepherds lay down their lives for the sheep

"I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

Anyone who has read Jesus' description of leadership (Matthew 20:25-27) knows that His model was diametrically opposed to that of the world. He taught that authentic leadership must stem from (and be demonstrated by) acts of service. The prevailing secular model is ultimately based on relationships of power.

How often have you heard someone described as "Machiavellian"? Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) was an adviser to the Medici family in Florence; he famously taught that, "A prince never lacks legitimate reasons to break his promise."

In Machiavelli's world view, "Those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men". To Machiavelli and his disciples, leadership was synonymous with the amoral exercise of power, secured by "whatever it took".

The challenge for Christian leaders today is not to imbibe these kinds of values, but to follow in the footsteps of one who said that genuine leadership is not about driving, manipulating, using and discarding others, but making the ultimate sacrifice, at personal cost, for their ultimate good. Only by putting others first (even within strict hierarchies) can leaders impact their lives. This applies in marriage, business, church and public life.

What makes all of this compelling reading is that Jesus was under no obligation to lay down His life for *any* sheep.

He came as the creator, the Eternal Logos, the expression of the Father. Demons recognised Him as the Son of God. He raised the dead, healed sickness, performed every kind of miracle, but espoused the principle that the only standard of leadership that truly counted in the long run was placing others at the head of the queue and serving them. Jesus nowhere demanded His rights. He did not raise His voice above the clamour, just to be heard. He did not engage in self-aggrandisement, but became poor, and a servant, for our sakes.

Such a contrast is challenging; it is revolutionary. If God's standard of leadership were to become mandatory there would be few candidates. No automatic honours, no rewards, no perks, nothing, in this life, only service and sacrifice. I can hear people saying, "But I didn't sign up for this. I didn't study and work hard so that my reputation could be of no account. Look at me. Be impressed. Listen to the words of wisdom that come out of my mouth. But don't ask me to give it all up and go back to the bottom of the greasy pole".

Jesus declared that He had come to lay down His life for the world. Not for a creed, or a doctrinal statement. Not even for the reputation of Israel and its Law and prophets, but for people like you and me (Philippians 2:5-11).

5. Effective leadership engenders a sense of security in followers

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."

Are you a leader worth following? Have a look around and see who is following you. Who values your opinions and judgement? Why should they? Whom do they really trust with their future?

Do you have the courage to put yourself in Jesus' shoes and engage those who look to you with an eye to serve, not just getting your own way to achieve your personal or professional goals?

Lead well and others will grow. They will give above and beyond, not out of a sense of fear or obligation, but because you bring out the best in them. Protect them, like a flock entrusted to your care, but not in an overbearing way. Give them space to be themselves, as individuals, with hopes and aspirations, mixed with occasional disappointments. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you lead with attitudes that promote stability, security, fruitfulness and mutual commitment. If you lead like Jesus you will be in a minority, but you will not be alone. Follow Him and those who follow you will be transformed by His life.