

20<sup>th</sup> September 2015

Most of you are aware by now that I follow the political landscape both at home and abroad with a keen interest. I am with Archbishop Desmond Tutu when he said:

“When people say that the Bible and politics don’t mix, I ask them which Bible they are reading”. It’s a comment that burned itself into my values in youth and remains with me today.

It won’t surprise you to know that in recent weeks I have been preaching and writing about the Refugee crisis and the various responses to it. And I’ve been helping the University where I work and its Students’ Union to respond in the best ways they can. Students and young people can often find themselves derided in society, so it is heartening to be able to report on their willingness to help.

The impact of the Refugee crisis has highlighted the importance of good leadership and has graphically demonstrated what happens when this

is not in place. The consequences can be disastrous at the human level and utterly lacking in compassion. But which one of us would welcome shouldering such high office and responsibility.

But we cannot afford to stay on the side-lines either. Desmond Tutu again said:

‘If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.’

It has also been fascinating to watch the Labour Party struggle through a protracted leadership contest and finally elect the one deemed unelectable at the beginning. We’ll have to watch this space to see what impact it will have on the political culture and for how long. But it certainly has people on all sides shifting uncomfortably in their seats as they familiarise themselves with this new style of leadership. Of course, his every move is under scrutiny, right from his questionable sense

of fashion through to his quiet refusal to sing the National Anthem.

Something else important has happened just yesterday – I was privileged to be at the service in Gloucester Cathedral as our new Bishop, Rachel, embarked on her ministry amongst us in this Diocese. People have very, very high hopes of her. Most likely, far beyond anything that is realistic of someone that we would also like to be human if possible. She even referred to herself as a flawed human being. Again, we will have to wait and see.

And it is leadership that I want to reflect on today for a few moments.... Good discernment is one of the hardest things we ever have to do as Christians, because it means working out what God wants for us. Not what we want for ourselves. And we need to do everything we can to help the Diocese understand what we think God wants for us, as together we try to identify the person God has chosen.

And we can only do that if we are clear about what kind of leadership we all need at this point in the life of this Benefice.

I truly wasn't intending to preach about this at all, but when I read the readings set for today (James 3:13-4:3, Mark 9:30-37), and with everything else that has been happening around us, it was evident that I needed to place them right at the heart of our context and our present reality of being in vacancy. Without a leader.

Jesus in today's Gospel delivers that famous line 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all'. That wouldn't be a bad strapline would it at the top of a job description.

And then Jesus places a little child among them and says 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Again, what a wonderful endorsement this would be of the work and hospitality among our children and

young people that over the last few years has begun afresh here. What a wonderful endorsement this would be of the spirit of welcome, many have experienced here, including me.

And in the great letter of James, increasingly my favourite letter in the New Testament, who describes for us so perfectly the definition of wisdom – he writes, ‘the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.’ Not a bad list to add to the desirable, even the essential column.

There would be a danger though, wouldn't there, that if these were the only attributes a leader had – well they might occasionally act weakly or lack direction. Yes, that is true. I lead a team at the University where I work and I know just how difficult it can be at times to strike the right balance. And it can be difficult too not to take things personally when they don't go according to plan.

But hopefully we want our new leader to be a human being too. Sometimes the captain of the

ship, maybe more often, the ship's rudder. But most of all, a person who will work with us, the sails of the ship, so that we are best placed to catch the winds of the Holy Spirit and move as the spirit did across the face of the water that is our town and our villages.

Jesus was a leader full of love for his friends who offered them questions when they might rather have had answers, whose questions were often met with silence.

Let us commit together this morning to pray that God will lead us, perhaps where we may not want to go, and find us willing to follow Jesus. Pray for wise and humane leaders in our church. For Bishop Rachel at the beginning of her ministry. And especially, pray as we discern what kind of leadership God wants for us and pray too for the one who God will choose to lead us here.