

St David's Day service – Jesus College Oxford – 28th February 2017

Nearly one thousand years before the founding of this college, a leader with vision, exacting standards and the ability to inspire others drew together a group of followers on a remote peninsula in West Wales. Together, they built a monastery and in it formed a monastic community in which they lived and worked together prayerfully, ascetically and in the service of others.

This remarkable leader was Dewi, long regarded as the first Bishop of St Davids.

Three weeks ago, in the gem of a building which is St Davids Cathedral, the 129th Bishop of St Davids was installed. The Cathedral, built on the site of Dewi's monastery, is one of those prayed in places where the distance between heaven and earth seems small – a thin place as Celtic Spirituality would put it.

The installation was a joyful, uplifting occasion – like this evening, the service was in both languages. The new Bishop, Joanna, the first woman Bishop Wales has had, sends her warmest greetings to you all.

To lead an institution with a long history is a complex task. In addition to all the normal management challenges – money, or lack of it, people consuming time and energy, the continual need to persuade the reluctant of the need for change, there is the weight of history. Any leader following in the footsteps of those who have been loved for their character and admired for their effectiveness, is bound to feel that somehow their predecessors are continually whispering – don't let me down. For fans of Harry Potter, a bit like all those pictures in Dumbledore's study. In such an organisation, a leader is going to have a continual battle between what culture should be – the way we do things round here and a default of the way we have always done things round here. Any Vicar trying to move the time of a service will recognise that dynamic. The history of the church and the history of the Academy are closely linked; I suspect we grapple each day with similar issues.

Timothy, to whom Paul was writing in our second reading, was both a young leader and a newish leader. Paul had left him in Ephesus to lead the Church there – a Church which Paul had founded. It was a young Church but one in which a combination of a revered founder and some strong-minded members would have made leadership tricky. Effective leaders need to be strong in both character and competence. As Christians, the forming of our character comes as we allow ourselves, each day, to be drawn ever deeper into relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And our engagement with scripture is part of this process. So, what practical tips can we pick up from what was said to Timothy?

Firstly, we are to be workers (v15) who do their best to carry out, with excellence, the tasks which we have been assigned. Leading a church, leading a new enterprise, leading an ancient institution has always and always will be demanding, hard work. Mature Christian character embraces that truth and engages with it prayerfully seeking the inspiration and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The exhortation to do our best brings with a sense of a continuing process. As continual learners, our best now will no longer be our best a year

from now. As I struggle with learning Welsh – I'm currently in the throes of trying to understand mutations - I hope that my best now really won't be my best in a year's time!

Secondly, we are to be wise with words (v16). At whatever level of leadership we operate, our words and how we say them will be taken seriously, interrogated for hidden meaning and remembered. An unwise putdown, a joke at someone's expense, an angry outburst can resonate for years in an ancient institution. And not only has a leader to be careful with his or her own words, Timothy is being urged to make sure that other leaders – whether actual leaders or de-facto leaders, are being wise with their words too. Gangrene is a strong analogy to use for the destructive power which words can have. But it should remind us of the seriousness of being careful with what we say and how we say it.

Thirdly, we are to be clear about the standards which we choose to underlie our personal integrity (v22). There is a sense in this verse of both running from things which will harm us and towards those things which are beneficial. Being a leader, particularly in an historic institution is to be in a role where the urgent will try to crowd out the important, the pragmatic to displace the principle, the weight of history to oppose attempts to bring change. And as we face the challenges, being clear-eyed and intentional about what we are choosing to run from as well as what we are choosing to run towards is the way to avoid unchosen compromise.

Fourthly, we are to have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies. No mincing of words there. Not all controversies are stupid and senseless – throughout the history of the church there have been points in the journey where the path has divided and great discernment was needed on which way to go. But some controversies are stupid and the advice here is not to get involved in them. But, deciding which is which is not straight forward. This year, we mark 500 years since Martin Luther took his hammer and nailed his theses to the church door in Wittenburg. Just imagine if you had been around at the time. How would you have decided if Luther was right or wrong? Was he the pedlar of stupid or senseless controversy? Or the prophet of much needed change?

Fifthly, we are told to be careful how we in our dealings with other people (v24). Notice the key words – kind, an apt teacher, patient, gentle. Interesting how these qualities chime so well with the list of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. The daily prayer of Christian leaders should be that this fruit should be more and more evident in their lives, in the dealing with others and as they seek to be those who bring calmness, hope, inspiration and courage to the challenges which come along. I heard recently that there is a leader of a large American church whose annual appraisal with his Board of Elders is entirely based on a 360-degree survey of how he is growing in the fruits of the Spirit. That's challenging.

And underlying all of these is the need for wisdom. Solomon had it absolutely right – the principle attribute any senior leader needs is wisdom. Leadership is not usually about following a map drawn by others but leading into new territory – the map drawing comes much later. Verse 11 of the passage we heard – for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. One of the few tools a leader has in the face of a decision which is both strategically crucial and for which there is no precedent, is

wisdom. How do we become wise? For the Christian, wisdom will grow as we devote time to and become changed by the One from whom all wisdom flows.

Leading a complex institution needs well developed character but also needs competence. In the church, it is not enough these days (if it ever was) to just be of good character to lead a large church, a Cathedral, a Diocese or an administrative organisation. The Church exists with both its own rules and also in a society with complex laws on HR, data protection, charity governance and so on. I suspect that a college with a long and distinguished history has the same sort of dynamic. The Bible is not a management textbook but, as we study the way Jesus led and developed his disciples there are some timeless truths from which we can learn. To lead out of deep relationship with God but also with a strong grasp of the insights of the best of the writers on organisational management and leadership is what is needed in the Church.

Timothy was a young leader with a tricky role. As we reflect both on our own roles as leaders and as those who may be called to significant roles of leadership in years to come, there is a question to ponder. What are we doing to make sure that we have principles which will hold however hard the wind blows, that we are rooted deeply into the power and wisdom of God, that we are seeking in increasing visible abundance, the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?

As far as we can know, no one had thought to build a monastery in a hollow near the sea in West Pembrokeshire before Dewi came along. He was a Pioneer, an inspirer of others, a man with an inauspicious start in life which he didn't allow to define him. A man to learn from, to admire and, tonight, to celebrate.

Amen