

fear and trust

God-centred leadership

David Runcorn (SPCK, 2011)

I'm not sure whether it is deeply ironic, or incredibly appropriate, that my last book review written while a CPAS Leadership Development Adviser is one which questions the current popularity of 'leadership' as the answer for our anxious and challenging times. Whichever it is, this book, while having 'leadership' in its subtitle, provides a very different take on the subject, and is an extremely perceptive and thought-provoking read.



I'm used to being told that the Old Testament is of limited usefulness when it comes to considering Christian leadership; a distinctly Christian leadership must surely take Jesus Christ as its starting point. But then I'd obviously overlooked the Samuel narrative, and after reading the first few pages of *Fear and Trust* was soon reminded of how much the context of 1 and 2 Samuel has in common with our own. The people of Israel, and contemporary Western society, share being 'in transition from long familiar securities, and going through considerable social upheaval'. The people of Israel decided that what they needed was a king; we are preoccupied with leadership 'as a way of securing the future'.

The chapter headings and subtitles reveal the themes explored in the book: *Surviving leaders: on journeying beyond certainty*. 'In the beginning you weep': *Hannah and the unexpected starting place*. 'Here I am': *Samuel, listening and the tinnitius of God*. On the desire to be led: *Leaders as the people's dream...* I was intrigued just by the headings, and drawn further into each chapter by the apposite quotation which starts each one.

Readers who are familiar with David Runcorn's other books will not be surprised to find this one a blend of reflection on Scripture, insight from his ministry and personal experience, thoughtful observation, and many moments where the reader is taken in an unexpected direction. I was particularly struck by the chapter on Jonathan. The chapter title 'What if?' provides a clue.

We are used to lamenting the story of Saul, contemplating David's failures amid much potential; and focusing on Jonathan as Saul's son and David's friend. But what if Jonathan had become king? Runcorn shows how the story presents Jonathan in a very strong light. He has all the qualities of kingship that Saul and David did not. 'Is the storyteller inviting us to conclude that an opportunity has been lost?' asks Runcorn. He then goes on to reflect on our own 'What if?' questions, and some of the situations which might prompt them, such as the Church of England's Preferment List, which contains the names of over 400 clergy deemed to have potential for senior leadership; most of these clergy will get no further than the List.

I was also struck by the way the story is enveloped by stories of women. Runcorn comments in the opening chapter on how subversive the story is, and how, in a world where men and women were unequal partners, as they still are, stories of women frequently subvert the script and 'open the story to new possibilities.'

The whole story starts with Hannah: her tears, her initiative, her prayers, her song. The story closes with a comparison of mourning mothers in Tehran to Rizpah, a concubine of King Saul. It's a reminder that in God's story, those who presume to have power are brought down, and the voiceless, poor and marginalised are 'raised up to a special place.' Runcorn also notes the irony that at the moment when women were admitted to the priesthood of the Church of England, 'the task was renamed and the focus redefined' by a noun drawn from worlds normally dominated by men.

To be read, re-read and pondered – but first you might need to re-read 1 and 2 Samuel!

Rosie Ward © CPAS 2011