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## courage in leadership

I can picture the scene now. I and a few senior colleagues were meeting our new boss for the first time, the recently arrived head of a major engineering programme. Most of us were concerned to create a good initial impression. He was a forceful character with an intimidating reputation and was clearly intent on change, but as he spoke, his more disparaging comments about past failures became very personal, unfair and inappropriate. Eventually, a colleague of mine, the next most senior person in the room, politely but firmly intervened, robustly refuting what was being said.

In itself it was a small and fleeting moment, but I remember it well because it was typical of this colleague. He was someone of real moral courage who consistently sought to do the 'right thing', usually when the stakes were infinitely higher than this particular incident.

Courage is not the first quality that comes to mind when thinking about leadership and yet Churchill considered it '...the first of human qualities because it is the quality that guarantees all others.'

Jesus lived a courageous life. The crucifixion is the most dramatic example of this, but the drama and intensity of this event can obscure the relentless courage he showed throughout his life. The gospels describe him challenging injustice, hypocrisy and prejudice. Even the miracles he performed stirred up passions on all sides, as did many of his encounters, which cut across cultural norms. Being counter-cultural can take courage; most of us like to 'fit in'. No doubt one reason many of his initial followers fell away was that they wanted a quieter life.

### Courage today

So what does courage look like in Christian leadership roles today?

Perhaps we immediately think of someone who has put their head well above the parapet on a game-changing issue. And it can be like this! Paul overcame considerable fear to proclaim the gospel to the Corinthians and thus enabled the founding of one of the first Gentile churches (1 Corinthians 2:3). A vicar that addresses an 'elephant in the room' issue, for instance a self-serving but nevertheless influential church member who has consistently bullied others and frustrated any change, can quickly bring about a much safer culture in which vision and gifts can be released.



But usually, courage in leadership is about lots of smaller initiatives, interventions and decisions. None of them in themselves make headlines – some of them tiny in the big picture – but together they make a real difference.

These ‘smaller steps’ of courage might include:

- Consistently nurturing a culture where people are empowered and gifts are allowed to flourish despite the ‘messiness’ that can ensue. For instance, taking the risk of inviting someone to lead a group who has potential but no ‘track record’ of leadership.
- Implementing an agreed change to a service structure as part of a wider vision knowing, no matter how comprehensively discussed and communicated, some will still strongly complain.
- Doing the ‘right thing’ while genuinely pastorally hurting for those affected.
- Encouraging a PCC to move towards, rather than away from, a key area of contention within a church.
- Being (appropriately) vulnerable as part of our leadership style.
- Preaching an ‘unpalatable’ sermon.
- Publically disagreeing with someone we count as a friend.
- Having that ‘difficult’ conversation.
- The moment of ‘firm touch’ at a PCC meeting to prevent someone dominating a discussion or not letting bad behaviour and attitudes simply pass.

Conversely, timidity, particularly a continual unwillingness to make the difficult decisions and choices or to take risks will, over the longer term, demoralise and erode trust; energy and commitment will seep away.

And yet courage is not reckless or self-serving. Neither is it pastorally insensitive or brash. Most of the above examples undertaken unwisely and/or from wrong motives could do more harm than good. All of which begs the question, how can we cultivate courageous leadership which is both authentic and sustainable?



### **Courage and the Holy Spirit**

Arguably the most striking transformation of courage in the Bible is of the early disciples and it's no accident it spans Pentecost. Acts 4:31 tells us they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. Courage in our witness and leadership is something that flows from the constant infilling of the Holy Spirit; it's not primarily about our strength but God's power and grace working in and through us (2 Corinthians 12:9). As Paul says to Timothy: 'For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline' (2 Timothy 1:7). Therefore, a clear priority is to continually know that infilling of the Spirit and to maintain that first love.

### **Courage and prayer**

Acts 4:31 also tells us that the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost was immediately preceded by prayer. Similarly, Paul asks the Ephesians for prayer that he may be given words not simply to proclaim the gospel but to do it boldly (Ephesians 6:19).

James Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, was in stature and temperament miles away from an archetypal heroic character but he was supremely a person of prayer and this was fundamental in giving him courage, resilience and resolve which characterised his life and leadership.

Similarly, many courageous Christian leaders are only too aware of their natural frailties and fears but nevertheless have learned to pray regularly for courage.

### **Courage and wisdom**

Wisdom and shrewdness are vital allies of a courageous leader. In John 7, Jesus is urged by those around him to increase his public visibility by attending a big festival in Judea but responds 'my time is not yet here'. He later does attend but, we are told, 'in secret'. Jesus knows the implications, the passions that will be stirred up and he's ready to face them; the issue isn't courage but timing and method. Wisdom means gauging pace, choosing the moment to act, finding the right way and words and being realistic about our energy levels to fight a battle.

### **Courage and collaboration**

Gilbert Bilezikian writes, 'Throughout the New Testament, church leadership is presented as a collective ministry. Even when the indefinite term "leader" is used in the context of Christian community, it receives a plural reference.' There are many benefits to purposively cultivating collaborative leadership but leading courageously can be easier when difficult steps are discussed



and shared, particularly with those who will stand with you as the pressures increase.

### **Courage and encouragement**

Paul's letters to Timothy are full not only of practical guidance but also encouragement. One definition of 'encourage' is 'to inspire courage'. Building a network of support, particularly people who can regularly encourage and affirm us, will build our courage and a sense of security.

### **Courage and calling**

Paul writes to the Thessalonians that his courage in proclaiming the gospel despite opposition arises from his love of God and realisation that the gospel has been entrusted to him (1 Thessalonians 2:1-4). This strong sense of calling can in itself bolster our courage and resolve.

A vicar I know well showed sustained courage over many years in changing the structure of a multi-parish benefice to facilitate a much clearer focus on mission, often facing significant opposition. He says it was the strong calling God gave him in that role that gave him the resilience to keep going.

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#### **For reflection**

- Think back to a courageous step you took in the past. What factors enabled you to take this and how could you nurture these further?
- What one courageous step may God be calling you to take in your current situation?

