

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP: LEAD AS YOU ARE

BY ESTHER PRIOR, VICAR, ST JOHN'S COVE

When I became a parent, I found myself plunged into the very competitive world of mothers. A world that seemed to have unwritten rules about what mothers do. There seemed to be the expectation that somehow I would turn into a baking and craft-loving person if I was going to make the cut.

By my son's second birthday, I succumbed to the pressure and tried my hand at baking. In my defence the result only suffered from mislabelling rather than total failure. If I'd had the foresight to call it a large chocolate birthday brownie instead of a birthday cake, no one would have been the wiser!

Now I am grateful for 'Cakegate' because it led to a moment of clarity. I realised that the best mother I could be was to be myself. I can sustain that... I don't bake, but I am a very good cook. I don't 'craft', but I love to sing and dance. So that's what my children get: a cooking, singing and dancing mother.



LEADING AS YOU ARE

This became for me very fruitful soil for reflections on leadership. I realised the best leader that I could be, the best vicar I could be, was myself. I can sustain that. Authentic leadership in this sense is about trusting the God who calls you: trusting that he knows all about you. He knows your personality. He knows your weaknesses and strengths. He knows your gifts. He knows what lights you up. He knows you – he has known you from your mother's womb. Not a moment of your life has been hidden from his sight.

Psalm 139 is a powerful reminder of this:

You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.

Psalm 139:1-3

And he, who is *familiar with all your ways*, in his wisdom (or sense of humour) chose *you* to lead. Take heart and lead on as you are.

Don't get me wrong – this does not mean that we stop repenting, learning and growing. It doesn't mean that we stay forever in our comfort zones and lose sight of all that makes for courageous leadership; it just means that we learn to be comfortable in our own skin.

It's being able to echo these wonderfully healing words:

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalms 139:14

It means we learn to stop comparing ourselves with others and instead we go on a journey of discerning what 'us shaped' things God wants to accomplish through us. It's accepting that if someone else was to lead in your place, what would emerge would be different to what you accomplish. It doesn't mean it is better or worse – just 'you shaped' and 'them shaped'. Take heart and lead on as you are.

I find great encouragement in the Old Testament, in particular where we get much more insight into the different personalities that God chooses to use. This is so true of the prophets. Take for example the way we tag them – the most famous tag being for Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. Micah is known as the prophet of the poor; Isaiah, the prophet of holiness or hope; Hosea, the prophet of love and faithfulness; Amos, the prophet of justice and so on.

I have a friend that I call 'Mr Fair Trade' and if he is being authentically himself, there is no way that he will lead a community that doesn't get a passion for economic justice imparted to it. Another friend of mine is so funny – when he is in his stride he can make a conversation about what we choose to eat for breakfast so hilarious that he has us in stitches. I often ask him – do they laugh a lot at the church you lead? It seems to me that if he is being an authentic leader, leading as he is, the church he leads will be filled with laughter. So, please, take heart and lead on as you are.

LEADING AS YOU AREN'T

Apart from trusting the God who chose you to lead, there are other factors to consider in this definition of authentic leadership. It helps to lead as you are if you have a clear understanding of who you are *not*. A friend once asked me a liberating question that I often revisit: 'who is the Messiah here?' It's a relief to remember that the answer is always the same: 'not me!' If that's true, if I am not here to be the Saviour of the world – it sets me free to be who God has made me to be and I'm also free to accomplish the 'me-shaped, non-messiah type stuff' that God has prepared for me. It means it's

okay for me to acknowledge that there are some things that I simply can't do; things that I simply don't have the aptitude, the gifting, the passion or maybe even the personality for. But that's okay; God is familiar with all my ways... I can lead as I am. As long as I lead, following his lead:

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalms 139:23-24

And it's fine that there are some things that I simply can't do because the next consideration takes care of that.

LEADING IN PARTNERSHIP

Leading as you are is possible in partnership (rather than in competition) with other leaders. We are called to lead as a part of something much bigger than ourselves and in partnership with other uniquely gifted people. I rather like the way The Message expresses Ephesians 4:

You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness.

Ephesians 4:4-6

But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift.

Authentic leadership, leading as you are is possible when you have a strong sense that it isn't all up to you. There are God-gifted people around you that can do the things that you can't do. So take heart: lead on as you are and let others lead as they are. Lead on, the one who has called you is familiar with all your ways.



FOR REFLECTION

1. Are their unspoken 'leadership expectations' that you have been trying to fit?
2. My children get a cooking, singing and dancing mum – what sort of leader do people get when they have you?
3. How do you respond to the idea that the God who is familiar with all your ways chose *you* to lead?