

Transforming School Leadership – don't ask me, ask the donkey

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A lecture for headteachers of church schools

Introduction

New every morning is the love our waking and uprising prove. Early one morning the Mother Superior was riding on her donkey through the convent grounds. From sleep and darkness she had been safely brought, restored to life and power and thought.

Suddenly the donkey was startled by a snake. It brayed in terror and bucked and reared, and set off at a gallop as fast as its hooves would carry it, with the Mother Superior clinging on for dear life. It knocked over the beehives, trampled on the herb garden, and galloped hither and thither and round and round and in and out of the cloisters, unpredictable and uncontrollable from one second to the next. The Mother Superior held on for dear life. The sisters – they too from sleep and darkness safely brought, restored to life and power and thought – were gobsmacked.

This behaviour of the Mother Superior did not correspond, so far as they could remember, to any of the performance indicators in the convent development and improvement plan, nor to any of the targets in their leader's personal action plan. Where was she, they wondered, taking them? 'Mother, mother,' they called out. 'Where are we going?' – 'Don't ask me,' she replied. 'Ask the donkey.'

This image of the leader sitting astride an unpredictable and uncontrollable donkey, and clinging on for dear life – do we here this morning recognise it? Is it an image of our experience of being a headteacher at the start of the twenty-first century? That's a painful question. Even more painful, would our deputies and staffs recognise it as an image of headship? Do they call out to us, 'Headteacher, headteacher, where are we going?' ? Do we in effect reply, for we can no other, 'Don't ask me, ask the donkey'?

Those are obvious questions to ask. A less obvious one, but more interesting, is about the kind of the leadership the story portrays. Is the story, as certainly it appears to be at first sight, about negative leadership – headteachers who are at the mercy of unpredictable and uncontrollable events, and unable to give any kind of reassurance, let alone purposeful guidance, to their colleagues? Or does the story set forth an image of positive leadership, the subject-matter of this conference? Is it about transforming leadership, the phrase in this lecture's title? If so, what are the features of positive and transforming leadership that the story invites us to search for? That is the key question of this lecture.

The first thing to note in this regard is that donkeys and asses have honourable places in the Christian popular imagination and that their name is not Neddy, but Chrissy, short for Christopher. For they are, as the term might be, christopherous. For example, a donkey bears Christ towards his birth, or so any way nativity plays assure us: 'Been a long time, little donkey, through the winter's night. Don't give up now, little donkey, Bethlehem's in sight.' Keep right on, our children sing, to the end of the dusty road, you've got to keep on plodding, little donkey, all with your precious load. In medieval carols, the phrase 'precious load' refers to that which Mary carries when she is pregnant, the Word in the process of being made flesh.

For Saint Francis, Brother Donkey was the name he gave to the beast of burden that carried the precious load of himself around – his own body. When he was dying, according to legend, he mentioned Brother Donkey alongside his brethren in the monastery:

Verily, then said he,
I crave before I pass
Forgiveness full and free
Of my little brother, the ass.
Many a time and oft,
When winds and ways were hot,
He hath borne me cool and soft
And service grudged me not.

The reference here is not only to St Francis's body, the embodiment and outworking of his DNA, and not only to his real donkey, but also to his Master, the suffering, all-loving Christ, the embodiment of the loving-kindness that, according to the song and story of Christianity, turns the world round, that transforms.

'Consider, brethren,' said he,
'Our little brother, how mild,
How patient, he will be,
Though men are fierce and wild.
His coat is gray and fine,
His eyes are kind with love;
This little brother of mine
Is gentle as the dove.'

For G.K.Chesterton, Christopher the donkey was an image of the whole Christian gospel. Outwardly unprepossessing, without comeliness, a creature of sorrows, 'the tattered outlaw of the earth, of ancient crooked will', starved, scourged, derided, but knowing and remembering and treasuring the experience of transformation, the day of glory when it carried the embodiment of loving-kindness into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday:

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

If the donkey is the human body, if the donkey carries and bears Christ, if the donkey is Christ himself, the famous words of the Mother Superior have a rich texture of multiple interpretations: 'Don't ask me, ask the donkey'. They evoke, perhaps, positive leadership, not negative. The word 'lead', by the way, is connected in the history of language with the words 'load' and 'lade'. To lead is to carry a load, a precious load – though sometimes, yes, it feels anything but precious, it feels more like an intolerable burden. 'Ye who are heavy laden' means 'ye who are weighed down by being oppressively led'. Also, it means 'ye who are weighed down with the load, the precious load, of being a leader'.

Enough of poetry, metaphor, etymology, scripture. Let us turn for a while to the prosaic, matter-of-fact, straight world of being a headteacher – the trivial round and common task. These may not, *pace* John Keble, furnish all we need to ask. But they are where we are. What leadership maxims and wisdom can guide us as we engage with them?

Recollections and reflections from the secular literature

In the next part of this lecture I wish to recall a handful of things that secular books about leadership and management say. Later, I shall recall one or two things that Christian writers on leadership say. When doing so I shall return to donkeys, particularly Chesterton's Palm Sunday donkey, and I shall ponder again the meanings of the Mother Superior's famous words: 'Don't ask me, ask the donkey'.

Before turning to the writings of gurus, I recall a range of mottoes on lapel badges, postcards and slips of paper inside Christmas crackers. 'When you don't know what to do, look worried and walk fast', 'If it weren't for the last moment, nothing would ever be done', 'To err is human, to forgive is not our policy', 'No paper has yet been written that cannot be filed under Miscellaneous', 'Tell me what you need and I'll tell you how to manage without it', 'I don't suffer from stress, I'm a carrier', 'If everything's going well, you must have overlooked something', 'If your colleagues keep smiling when things are going wrong, it's because they have decided to pin all blame for the disaster on you', 'If you explain everything so clearly that no one can possibly misunderstand, someone will', 'Colleagues do sometimes act rationally, thoughtfully and creatively, but only after they have thoroughly researched all other possible alternatives', 'Eat a live toad first thing in the morning, and nothing worse will happen to you for the rest of the day'. And there are the three stages of decision-making adopted by everyone other than yourself: 'Stage one, get ready. Stage two, fire. Stage three, take aim.'

The trivial round, the common task, is where we have to cope as decently as we can, not where perfect solutions are ever found.

But anyway. I continue with ten points drawn from the secular leadership and management literature.

One: management is about answers, leadership is about questions

Management is about settling things according to rules and roles. It is an important and noble business. Leadership, however, is about helping people to cope when the rules and roles are no longer an adequate, let alone a certain, guide. Another way of referring to the distinction between management and leadership is to speak of 'transactional leadership' on the one hand, solving problems according to role and rule, and 'transforming leadership' on the other, when there's an element of making it up as you go along, and never being certain, and taking – inevitably – risks.

Two: good leadership is about not answering questions

There are plenty of effective leaders – highly effective, from their own point of view – who are also bad leaders. The leadership literature, by the way, is often terribly, indeed outrageously, reticent about this. Effective leaders who were also bad leaders include Hitler and Stalin, etc and etc, and, less obviously, all too many of the white males held up for our admiration in the leadership literature. Effective good leaders help their followers to live and wrestle with, as distinct from find quick fixes for, questions and problems that have not yet been solved, and that for the present are insoluble.

Three: wanting to make the world a better place is necessary but not sufficient

Effective leaders, whether good or bad, want to make the world from their own point of view a better place or, less ambitiously but every bit as remarkably, want to

prevent the world getting worse. But that's not good enough. What is their vision of better and worse? We must ask and have views about this, even though the leadership literature often does not.

Four: the centrality of relationships

The effective leader, whether good or bad, inspires and empowers his or her followers. He or she makes them feel bigger, better, more powerful, more purposeful. An aspect of relationships in what the literature calls transforming leadership is that leaders are affected and moulded by their followers – the influence is not all one-way. This is not to say that leaders merely pander to their followers.

Five: the leader as a model of relating

Further, the leader provides a model for how followers should in their turn lead others. For example, staff learn from a good headteacher how they should treat their pupils, the learning being in and through the quality of headteacher/staff relationships rather than, or as well as, as what the head actually says. From a headteacher who is both effective and good, staff learn that pupils must be respected and trusted and liked. (From a head who is effective but bad, however, staff learn that pupils are tiresome little savages.)

Six: knowledge of the change process

There is a story that John Henry Newman once asked John Keble what Keble thought of a sermon that he (Newman) had preached. 'Well, it was good,' said Keble. 'But I think it would have been better, if you hadn't tried to be original.' Effective leaders know when to be original, even shocking, but also know when to treasure tradition and conservatism. It's one of their many remarkable knacks. It's part and parcel of their intuitive sense of how to introduce and manage change – managing stability is just as important as managing change, sexier though the latter is often made to sound.

Seven: information and knowledge

The leader helps their staff to transform information into knowledge and to ensure that knowledge is then shared and acted on. In this age of emails bombarding our inboxes from one moment to the next this aspect of leadership has never been more obvious. Or so difficult.

Eight: the leader is a teller of stories

Leaders create and maintain a sense of coherence and purpose by enabling their followers to locate themselves in larger narratives – the song and story of the organisation, of the nation, of the species. 'Great leaders,' Ben Okri has said, 'tell their nations fictions that alter their perceptions. Napoleon exemplified this and made himself into an enthralling story. Even bad leaders know the power of negative stories.'

Nine: downwards accountability

All the official discourse is of headteachers being upwardly accountable to the government, and to the various representatives and minders that the government puts in place. But the good head is accountable essentially to his or her staff, and through them to the children. A Christian term for this, incidentally, is 'servant leadership'.

Ten: a personal style marked by energy, enthusiasm and hopefulness

A depressing thought, perhaps, but true!

Recollections from the Christian literature

Three brief points on enormous subjects: prayer; inner transformation; crucifixion and resurrection.

First, prayer. New mercies each returning day, sang John Keble, hover around us as we pray. And help us, he continued, this and every day to live more nearly as we pray. What is prayer? One view is exemplified in the story of an 11 year-old boy on his way to bed. 'I'll be saying my prayers before I go to sleep,' he says to his family. 'Does anyone want anything?' An alternative view is outlined in some words of Rowan Williams. 'Prayer,' he says, 'is to do with sitting in the light and just being and becoming aware of who you really are.' And he adds:

[It's] a sort of gathering-in of awareness into yourself, which sounds a strange way of putting it, but it simply means our thoughts and fantasies are usually all over the place and running off after this, that and the other, and [prayer] is a sort of steady and quiet drawing in and settling all these tentacles that are wriggling out to lay hold of the world – you gather them back in... We simply become what we are and just sit there being a creature in the hand of God.

A headteacher, settling and collecting their thoughts for each member of staff, and holding in prayer the immaturities and maturities of each, is a creature in the hand of God, just sitting there.

Second, inner transformation. A recent Grubb Institute report on the success-factors in Church schools concluded that 'these Christian headteachers personally believed that pupils and staff could change their behaviour, because of their own experience of transformation, through Christ'. The concept of inner transformation is wonderfully illustrated in that great conversation between eight-year-old Jane Eyre and an Anglican clergyman, who speaks first:

'Do you read your Bible?'

'Sometimes.'

'With pleasure? Are you fond of it?'

'I like revelations, and the book of Daniel, and Genesis and Samuel, and a little bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, and Job and Jonah.'

'And the Psalms? I hope you like them?'

'No, sir.'

'No? Oh shocking! I have a little boy, younger than you, who knows six Psalms by heart; and when you ask him which he would rather have, a ginger-bread nut to eat, or a verse of a Psalm to learn, he says: "Oh, the verse of a Psalm! Angels sing Psalms," says he. "I wish to be an angel here below." He then gets two nuts in recompense for his infant piety.'

'Psalms are not interesting,' I remarked.

'That proves you have a wicked heart; and you must pray to God to change it; to give you a new and clean one; to take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.'

Inner transformation – hearts of stone transformed to hearts of flesh – is to do with the giving and receiving of forgiveness. A character in one of C.P.Snow's novels says that he wants a leader who knows himself and has to forgive himself to get along. Forgiveness, Walter Wright observes, 'may be the most important gift an organisation can give to its leaders, and the most important gift a leader can give to the people for whom he or she is responsible.' He comments further: 'Forgiveness offers people the chance to take

risks' and he concludes: 'Forgiveness flows from the heart of the leader's relationship with God'.

Third, crucifixion and resurrection. Rowan Williams was in New York on 11 September 2001. People often ask him, he says, where God was on that day. He replies: 'God is where God always is, and that is at the heart of whatever is happening.' He speaks of 'God's intimacy with and presence to the circumstances of suffering, even the deepest and most nightmarish suffering.' And even, we might add, the mundane sufferings of headteachers. Thirty years ago someone wrote a letter to a friend who was a headteacher. Here is how the letter finished:

There's nowhere you can avoid getting crucified, nowhere that I know. There are many more pointless places than where you are... You do know that, don't you. The choices before you are about how you set about being crucified. On this hang all the events of your Easter Sunday. Either you stop trying to love, trying to create channels for God to the people around you. Or you don't... If you try to love – if you let yourself be stretched out over your school, you the person, you the role, only then you will find what is right. You cannot escape your role. You must not let them escape theirs. In the destructive element immerse. Roles, organisations, are destructive elements. But immerse yourself in them. Be incarnate. And lo it is very good. On this hangs your Easter Sunday. Keep changing the roles and the rules of course, but not because they are destructive. For you cannot escape having a role. No one can who loves. An old commandment I give unto you. Your life must be hell. But you know, I envy you, your life must also be such fun. Easter Sunday round the corner, all the time.

A headteacher, that person was saying, is a tattered outlaw of the earth who is imbued with the hope of glory. But it's not just Easter Sunday that's round the corner all the time, but Palm Sunday too.

THE tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour,
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

Don't ask me, ask the donkey.

Background and references

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