

2021-08-22 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Revd Canon Judy Hunt

Hebrews 13: 16 – 21

'Obedience to Leaders?'

Introduction ...

I expect that most, if not all, of us here could give an answer to the question: **What is your favourite Bible verse?** although we might be pushed to choose just one!

But what about the question: **What is the most dangerous verse in the Bible?**

One possible answer came in our New Testament reading ... Hebrews 13 verse 17:

'Obey your leaders and submit to them.'

It may seem strange that I – as Rector – am highlighting this as a potentially dangerous verse ... instead of highlighting it as something for **"everybody else"** to take note of – but I think it is really important.

We've seen, in the last 2 to 5 years especially, just how damaging this can be.

Some of you may recall the 9.00 o'clock service in Sheffield two or three decades ago – held up as a model for the future ... but it turns out that the leader was manipulating and abusing members. The same with Jean Vanier who founded the L'Arche communities. The same with the leader of the Iwerne Camps – the Public School wing of Scripture Union.

And the culture of hierarchy and believing leaders ... endemic within the Churches – of all denominations.

How to move forward?

So I think we need to be very wary indeed of how to understand and apply this verse:

'Obey your leaders and submit to them ...'

For a balance – you could read Ezekiel 34 – a really damning passage about leaders who lead badly or wrongly.

But, of course, there is a rule for good leadership – and by 'good' – I mean both skilled and morally good.

Without some form of leadership, co-ordinated effort and positive direction are virtually impossible. Without leadership, there can be a 'power vacuum' that others – consciously or not – seek to fill.

And without 'group acknowledgement' that there is leadership ... chaos can ensue. One newly appointed Christian leader likened the role as being expected either to herd cats or to take cats on walks on leads!!

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Way Forward ...

What then do we do? How can leadership work for the common good?

We must have a willingness to call out 'bad leadership' ... whoever we consider to be our leader ... and whatever leadership position we hold – we need to be humble enough to listen to criticism and to respond to criticism in a Christ-like way ... with repentance where appropriate, with apology and explanation where appropriate.

Conclusion ...

Years ago, I read a book on priesthood which summarised it in this kind of way – though it has relevance in much wider contexts:

Christian leadership works well when the priest knows that he or she is there to serve the flock and the flock understands that they need to recognise and join in with the shepherd's direction ...

The writer continued:

The problems come when the flock thinks that the priest is there to serve them and the priest thinks he or she is there to direct the flock ...

Worth pondering ...

Amen.