

Unusually today I want to take as my starting point the first reading, which came from the Book of Joshua. If you would like to reflect on the Gospel, then go to the parish's web-site and there you will find a comprehensive commentary on the parable.

The Book of Joshua tells how the eponymous hero, formally assistant to Moses, now leader of the Israelites following Moses' death, takes the children of Israel over the River Jordan and into the Land God promised to Abraham and his descendants. And in a lightning campaign, Joshua achieves victory after victory, the walls of Jericho tumble down and town after town is taken and people after people are vanquished. It is too good to be true. For it isn't true. Jericho had no walls at this period of history to tumble down; indeed there was no Jericho to be vanquished. The story is a glorious piece of fiction; Joshua is an idealised figure; and the story of his swift and successful campaign is a story of how it ought to have been.

There was a film, based on a book, both called *Gambit*, which came out in 1966 starring Shirley MacLaine, Michael Caine and Herbert Lom. (It was remade last year, a detail which completely passed me and many others by, as it was a complete flop, despite having Colin Firth, Cameron Diaz and Alan Rickman in its cast.) *Gambit* first tells the story of a perfect heist, a robbery that is entirely successful. Everything goes smoothly, perfection. The MacLaine character, Nicole, speaks not a word. Then we realise that this is an invention, a work of imagination. We then have the real thing. It is a disaster from the first moment, in part because Nicole never stops talking.

Joshua and the Book that follows, Judges, is a similar double take. We have "How it should be" with the perfect invincible leader; and then we have "How it actually is", with leaders who are weak, fearful, and people who repeatedly "do what is evil in the sight of the LORD". It is an essay in what leaders are really like. Gideon, a coward for half the book and when the LORD God has given him victory, a cruel avenger who lusts after kingship but has not the courage to take it. Instead he sets up his own idol, in a manner that echoes Aaron making and worshipping the Golden Calf. Samson, a man of brute strength, but the emphasis is on brute. He follows his passions and is astonishingly stupid. In the end his strength-regained gains glory for the LORD.

The Bible has no plaster saints (given that Joshua is just unreal). All the great figures are flawed. Abraham, our father in faith, gives up his wife to a foreign king to save his own skin, twice! Moses is a murderer in his youth, makes every excuse to avoid obeying God's command and is impetuous throughout his life. David the great king, blessed so consistently by the LORD; but he gives way to adulterous lust and compounds his sin with the heinous crime of murder to cover his sin. I could go on and on.

The Bible's understanding of leadership is that we should not expect too much from our leaders. They will never live up to our highest expectations.

This pessimistic view from the Scriptures might surprise you; but the Bible knows human nature and reflects it so well.

We have all been shocked, scandalised by events in the Church in the past few weeks. The resignation of Benedict XVI came as a total surprise to everyone except the Holy Father himself. Opinions on the decision have been mixed. To some it is a sensible response to the demands of a role impossible to a much younger, fitter man. To others it is an outrage. "You cannot step down from the cross", said one pious no doubt, but heartless cleric. Benedict knows first hand what it is like to have an dying Pope, in charge but unable to govern the Church. And he will remember from his early priesthood the chaos and in-fighting that took place when Pius XII was dying in the 1950's and various cardinals openly sought power for themselves and exile for their opponents. His decision will have difficult repercussions no doubt, probably in ways we cannot think of today, but it was courageous and based on an honest, prayerful appraisal of himself and the needs of the Church he has loved and served all his life.

With regard to events in Scotland, we probably all thought, "Not again". Horror, shame, sadness, anger are all valid emotions. We know nothing of the substance of the accusations. What we do know, and what is so disturbing to many, is that the accusations were strenuously denied; and a week later Cardinal O'Brien acknowledged something improper (unspecified) had taken place.

We should not expect too much of our leaders but we surely can demand honesty. Of the many scandals that have been revealed in banks, in parliament, in the NHS, it is greed and cover-up which have enraged people. The Church is a human institution and will be afflicted by all the failures that human organisations so readily succumb to. But surely in the Church we can expect, we can demand, that the poor and vulnerable be protected, that malefactors be punished not protected, and that there will be openness and honesty. Too often there is secrecy and spin. Some things require confidentiality, of course. But many organisations manage to live with confidentialities protected; yet are able to be transparent in their operations. Why cannot the Church? It is the Church that should show the way.

When King David was faced with his crime, his confession was immediate. The mighty king was not above God's law. Neither is priest, or bishop; cardinal or Pope. Most reasonable people can accept human frailty. But those who lead us have got to be honest; must be able to own up and say without procrastination, "I have done wrong, forgive me."

Cardinal O'Brien was not honest; he vacillated. That will be remembered to his shame; Benedict XVI was honest about his failing health and the needs of his Church. That will be recalled to his honour.