

## Editorial

### Revd Dr Paul Beasley-Murray

#### Look to Jesus for Strength

Christian leadership can be a draining business, even for the strongest of ‘characters’. It involves a constant self-giving to other people, whether through preaching, counselling, empathising with people as they go through the crises of life, or just through the general ‘wear and tear’ of giving leadership. To survive, Christian leaders sometimes need to be incredibly resilient – in the words of a recent book on “the personal qualities of a priest”, they need to be ‘Steel Angels’.<sup>103</sup> It is therefore essential for leaders to look to Jesus for spiritual renewal; to open ourselves to his life-giving and life-sustaining presence; and to so ‘abide in him’ that the branches draw fresh sap from the vine. Only thus can strength be found for love and service.

John Perry, a former Bishop of Chelmsford, once commented: “The hardest lesson to accept and learn about Christian leadership is that it has to be in God’s strength and not our own. Other qualifications for leadership are necessary, but the primary qualification is a recognition that God’s work has to be done in his way and with his power. This cuts across the accepted attitude, ‘I can do this in my own strength’.”<sup>104</sup>

Ministry can often be sustained in the first few years by natural talent, but there comes a point when natural talent no longer suffices. Indeed, natural talent can prove a stumbling-block to the operation of God’s power in our lives. Sometimes it takes a real crisis in ministry to realise that the true source of power is in our utter dependence on Christ. This was the experience of the Apostle Paul. When tormented almost to the point of distraction by his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12.7), he discovered the truth of the risen Christ: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12.9). The Apostle’s weakness was a condition of his experiencing God’s power. Self-confidence only acts as a block to the source of divine power.

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<sup>103</sup> Magdalen Smith, *Steel Angels*, SPCK, London 2014.

<sup>104</sup> *Christian Leadership* (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1983) 10-11.

In other words, when we speak about developing character, it is always in relation to Christ. Strength to lead and minister in Christ's name is found in Christ alone. Our own resources are finite, his are infinite. This was the experience of Carlo Carretto, who described how God made him face up to his inadequacy and his need of power greater than his own: "Now I contrast my powerlessness with the powerfulness of God, the heap of my sins with the completeness of his mercy. And I place the abyss of my smallness beneath the abyss of his greatness. God can do everything and I can do nothing, but if I offer this nothing in prayer to God, everything becomes possible to me." <sup>105</sup>

Strength is needed in time of weakness. It is also needed in time of temptation. As with all God's people, the temptations that afflict leaders can be many and various. For instance, 'success' in ministry can be a leader's downfall. According to C H Spurgeon, "Success exposes a man to the pressures of people and thus tempts him to hold on to his gains by means of fleshly methods and practices, and to let himself be ruled wholly by the dictatorial demands of incessant expansion. Success can go to my head and will unless I remember that it is God who accomplishes the work, that he can continue to do without my help, and that he will be able to make out with other means whenever he wants to cut me out." Leaders need to look to Jesus for strength to remain humble and faithful.

Equally demanding are those occasions when 'success' does not appear to accompany our ministry. The temptation is then to look around, and in looking around become jealous of others. Indeed, in many ways jealousy seems to be the ministerial sin par excellence. Michael Ramsey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote that jealousy "is a poison which spreads more easily than you would think. You can be jealous of a man because he has gifts which you would like. You can be jealous of a man because while you think he lacks your gifts, he seems to be more successful than you. You can be jealous of a man because some of the people look to him when you thought of them as *your* people looking to you for spiritual help. In this case your love for people, through its intensity of feeling, can make you jealous, as you think of them as *your* people.

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<sup>105</sup> Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the Desert* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1990).

Thus complex are the elements which create pastoral jealousy.”<sup>106</sup>  
All the more reason, therefore, to look to Jesus for strength to  
serve.

## Leading with the Ears: Theology of Listening in a Pastoral Context

Ian Birch

*Principal of the Scottish Baptist College*

A wise old owl lived in an oak,  
The more he saw the less he spoke  
The less he spoke the more he heard.  
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?  
(author unknown)

“You must all be quick to listen.” (Jas 1.19)

In 2016, the Baptist Union of Scotland organised a two-day conference for ‘Pre-Accredited Ministers’ (those in the first three years of ministry) around the theme of *Listening to Others: Building Healthy and Compassionate Relationships*. I was asked to reflect on the theological aspect of listening in relation to pastoral ministry and found myself thinking about a subject to which I have given too little consideration. What I offer are some of the convictions which came to mind about the nature and task of listening as an essential part of the pastoral vocation.

### **Listening and *Kenosis*.**

If I think about what I did way-back when, and what we do now in terms of preparing people for ministry, in the main we train for speaking. I am not thinking only of modules in homiletics or sermon class, but even in theology courses students often want to know *the* answers to questions – why is there so much suffering

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<sup>106</sup> Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today* (SPCK, London rev. ed. 1985) 78. See also Paul Beasley-Murray, *Living Out the Call. Book One: Living for God's Glory*, Feed -A-Read 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2016, 74-82, which looks at how pastors can be guilty of all seven ‘deadly’ sins!