

Jesus the Humble Leader

Andrew Gordon-Brown

Christ's death in a leadership context

Robert K Greenleaf is the man who, in 1970, coined the phrase 'servant leadership' in his book *The Servant as Leader*. His ideas have influenced an entire generation of management experts and institutional leaders. Jesus Christ has been the inspiration for a whole approach to leadership and management in the world today.

So, in my talk today we will consider:

- What sort of leader is Jesus Christ?
- How have organisations and institutions around the world translated this into their own ideas on leadership?
- What do the Jesuits have to contribute to leadership wisdom?
- What are we doing at Stonyhurst as we train leaders in service of others?

We reflect today, Good Friday, on what Jesus Christ has done for us. As Jesus grew in wisdom during his ministry, he becomes increasingly aware of the will of his father, that he will be called on to pay the ultimate price. And when John, his cousin, is gruesomely murdered with Herod's wife demanding his head on a plate, Jesus must have paused for thought at just how threatened the powers that be felt about him.

Many of the crowd that cheered his entry into Jerusalem, celebrated last week on Palm Sunday, would turn on him. They received him enthusiastically believing that the Messiah would defeat their Roman oppressors. They seemed to miss the hint that Jesus gives by arriving on a donkey, a sign of peace not war. The main story last week, it strikes me, is not the cheering of the crowds as Jesus enters Jerusalem, but that he chose to enter Jerusalem in the first place, knowing that he would die there.

In answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?",¹ Peter says, you are the Christ the son of the living God. From then on, we are told, Jesus began to teach his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die and rise again, to give his life as a ransom for many. It is clear that Peter and the other disciples did not understand fully the nature of Christ's mission.

And we reflect today on the extraordinary, and ultimately life giving leadership that Jesus showed when he picked up his cross for Calvary. This is leadership in an entirely different league to the very best CEOs, Kings or Queens, Prime Ministers or Presidents. This is the leadership of a saviour. As Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us, although his state was divine, Jesus did not cling to his equality with God, but assumed the condition of a slave, a servant king.

¹ Matthew 16:16

Christ as leader, servant leader

So, how would we describe Jesus' leadership style? Firstly, let us spend a moment discussing whether we think Jesus did exercise leadership, by considering the following elements of some common leadership definitions. Most leadership literature agrees that leaders are individuals who have vision, who attract followers, are people who share their vision with their followers, and enable the group together to achieve the common goal. Turn to the person next to you and just for a couple of minutes discuss whether you think Jesus had:

- vision
- attracted followers
- shared his vision with followers
- enabled the group together to achieve a common goal

To be fair, Hitler would score pretty highly on these measures, so there must be other defining characteristics about Jesus' leadership. A key point to make is that Jesus' life of service originated from his relationship with God. As Jesus says, I have come to do the will of the one who sent me. This is made clear in the parable of the vine and the branches:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me. . . . My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commands you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love."²

Jesus here is very much defining all that he does as the will of his father. Essentially Jesus seems to be saying that I am fit to lead you as servant because I have given myself to the leadership of my father. He gives a similar message earlier in the gospel: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise

your Father in heaven."³ He is saying that our world view needs first to be underpinned by a loving creator God.

And when Jesus sets about recruiting his team, he said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."⁴ The clear message here is that whilst you will be a follower of mine, you will also be a leader, and that a good leader also has to be a good follower. Jesus' clear mission here is to transform the world through transformed people.

1 Jesus has perfect self-awareness, rooted in his relationship with God, his father. This is the reality that underpins Jesus' leadership style.

Jesus goes on in John's gospel, following on from the parable of the vines, he says this:

"This is my command: love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, that someone would lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you."⁵

2 Jesus is the sort of leader who lays down his life for his friends. So the second pillar of his leadership approach is love. This love is manifested in service to others.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of Jesus' view on leadership is at the point in Matthew's gospel where the mother of James and John asks Jesus if her sons can sit with him, one on his right hand the other on his left in his Kingdom. Jesus goes on to explain his idea of leadership.

"But Jesus called them to Himself and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the

³ Matthew 5:16

⁴ Matthew 4:19

⁵ John 15:12-14

² John 15:5-10

Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."⁶

3 Jesus is a servant leader, not motivated by his personal desire for power or status, but to serve. Jesus was prepared to serve everyone, even the one who would ultimately betray him. To illustrate this, he the Son of God, washes the feet of his disciples before the last supper.⁷ In doing this he enhanced rather than diminishes his position as their teacher.

Jesus' and therefore God's relationship with humankind is wonderfully illustrated in Luke and Mark's gospel about the disciples on the road to Emmaus.⁸

Two followers of Jesus, one named Cleopas, were walking away from Jerusalem, discouraged by the events of the previous days. They had believed that Jesus was the Messiah to redeem Israel, and he had ended up dead, crucified. You can imagine the scene – two dejected men walking away from the holy city. Jesus appears to them, and the nature of the discussion and of Jesus actions give us a lovely insight into his style of leadership.

Picture the scene: They have turned their backs on Jerusalem, walking away, dejected. Jesus doesn't stop them and say, "Wake up gents, it's me. I have risen, just like I said I would, now turn around, let's go back to Jerusalem to be with the other disciples". No, he appears and walks with them, away from Jerusalem. And he proceeds to give them what must have been the most terrific bible study of all time – Luke tells us, "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures."⁹ And when they get to Emmaus, their destination, he doesn't presume to stay with them, but rather makes to go on. He leaves it up to them to invite him to stay for a while longer, which they do. It is then in the breaking of the bread that they recognise him. Jesus is not forcing himself on these two men. He meets them where they

are, teaches them, and allows them to come to their own conclusions. That very hour we are told they got up and hurried back to Jerusalem to tell what had happened to them.

In preparing this talk, I came across a definition of leadership from the Diocese of Rochester in the US. Their leadership definition is "the process of influencing the behaviour of other people toward group goals in a way that fully respects their freedom."

The emphasis on respecting their freedom is an important one, and one which must be the hallmark of Christian leadership. Jesus influenced many diverse people during his ministry but compelled no-one to follow him. In the Emmaus story, Jesus is getting alongside these two men at a time of need, keeping his identity from them, teaching them, empowering them to make up their own minds, exercising their own freedom.

4 Jesus as leader works to unlock the potential in each one of us, respecting our freedom. A concept of God that is central to Ignatius Loyola's view is that of God labouring for us in all things.

So, self-awareness, love, service, freedom are all hallmarks of Jesus' leadership style. But this is not weak leadership, a serving attitude does not imply willingness to be abused by others or a soft touch.¹⁰ This gospel account suggests that Jesus' driving out of the money lenders was a pre-meditated action. He went up to the Temple and was appalled at what he found. He then made a whip from cords and drove the merchants and their cattle from the Temple area, and overturned the tables of the money changers. Here we see Jesus furious that the place of prayer is being used as a place where people are pursuing selfish greed. His response in this case is not a parable or a verbal put-down, but anger and action at unacceptable behaviour.

He was also unparalleled in his ability to expose people's hypocrisy and did not shy away from

⁶ Matthew 20:25 (see also Luke 22:26)

⁷ John 13: 1-20

⁸ Luke 24:13-35, Mark 16:12-13

⁹ Luke 24:27

¹⁰ John 2:12-22

having difficult conversations, the rigidly law abiding Pharisees being shown up frequently for their inability to see the wood for the trees.

And in that rather stark parable where Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a wedding banquet,¹¹ the message is very clear that to inherit eternal life requires an active response on our part (freely made). Many who were invited were too busy to respond and when the banquet had been filled with people from the highways and byways, to the person who did make it to the banquet but without a wedding garment, Jesus is very clear “Where is your wedding garment?” i.e. you were invited to the wedding, but you have done nothing to prepare yourself, now go away where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.

Jesus’ servant leadership is by no means weak leadership. When difficult conversations were to be had, he did not shy away from them. And when he was called upon to do the will of his father, he may have prayed in great distress in the Garden of Gethsemane “Father, if it is possible let this cup pass me by, but your will not mine be done.”¹² He showed great obedience and huge courage in following the will of his father.

How have organisations today translated the hallmarks of Jesus’ leadership for their own use?

Bookshops today creak with manuals professing to help make you a better leader. Consult these books to discover the seven habits, 12 secrets, the 14 powerful techniques, the 101 biggest mistakes. To be fair, there has long been agreement on the outputs we expect from a good leader, put simply: work out where we need to go (getting us to agree), point us in the right direction, and inspire us to overcome the obstacles separating us from our goal.

How has Jesus Christ, for most of us here, our ultimate leader, influenced leadership writing today?

As I mentioned, it was Robert Greenleaf who coined the phrase servant leadership. In his essay *The Servant as Leader* he writes:

“The servant-leader *is* servant first . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions . . . The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature . . . The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.”¹³

Here we have Jesus’ message of service from the gospels echoing down the ages and now strongly influencing a popular approach to leadership in today’s corporate world.

So, now it’s time for you to do a little work. I am going to flash up eleven questions. Keep count of the questions you would answer with a ‘yes’. If you can check more than seven of these, you may be well on your way to becoming a servant leader.¹⁴

1. Do people believe that you are willing to sacrifice your own self-interest for the good of the group?
2. Do people believe that you want to hear their ideas and will value them?
3. Do people believe that you will understand what is happening in their lives and how it affects them?
4. Do people come to you when the chips are down or when something traumatic has happened in their lives?

¹¹ Luke 14:7-14

¹² Matthew 26:39

¹³ see <http://www.greenleaf.org/whatisit/>

¹⁴ from John E Barbutu Jr. and Daniel W Wheeler, *Becoming a Servant Leader: Do You Have What It Takes?*

5. Do others believe that you have a strong awareness for what is going on?
6. Do others follow your requests because they want to as opposed to because they 'have to'?
7. Do others communicate their ideas and vision for the organization when you are around?
8. Do others have confidence in your ability to anticipate the future and its consequences?
9. Do others believe you are preparing the organization to make a positive difference in the world?
10. Do people believe that you are committed to helping them develop and grow?
11. Do people feel a strong sense of community in the organization that you lead?

Another useful way of looking at it is to compare the characteristics of a servant leader with those of a self-serving leader.

Self-Serving Leadership	Servant Leadership
Objective is to be served	Objective is to serve
Seeks first to be understood, then to understand	Seeks first to understand, then to be understood
Hierarchical relationship to team, no shared decisions	Relational structure in team with collaboration
Co-workers viewed as inferior	Co-workers seen as part of team
Creates atmosphere of dependence	Empowers others to lead with atmosphere of trust
Rejects criticism, takes credit, is accountable only to bosses	Encourages feedback, shares credit, accountable to God
Holds onto and protects information	Shares information openly with team
Focuses on self-image, advancement	Values followers with respect, promotes others before self

The best test according to Robert Greenleaf, and difficult to administer, is: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?"

A short poem by a man called Brewer¹⁵ reflects on the paradoxes of being a servant leader. A servant leader must be:

Servant Leadership

Strong enough to be weak
 Successful enough to fail
 Busy enough to make time
 Wise enough to say "I don't know"
 Serious enough to laugh
 Rich enough to be poor
 Right enough to say "I'm wrong"
 Compassionate enough to discipline
 Mature enough to be childlike
 Important enough to be last
 Planned enough to be spontaneous
 Controlled enough to be flexible
 Free enough to endure captivity
 Knowledgeable enough to ask questions
 Loving enough to be angry
 Great enough to be anonymous
 Responsible enough to play
 Assured enough to be rejected
 Victorious enough to lose
 Industrious enough to relax
 Leading enough to serve

Leaders of the Society of Jesus

If you do pick up a self-help book on how to become a better leader, I recommend one rather different book on the topic: *Heroic Leadership* written in 2003 by Chris Lowney.

As Lowney says in the opening sentence of his book, "After living for seven years as a Jesuit seminarian, practising vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to the Jesuit general in Rome, I morphed into a corporate man." Lowney left the Jesuits to join JP Morgan, one of the best known and respected global investment banks. He spent seventeen years at JP Morgan before writing *Heroic Leadership – Best Practices from a 450-year-old Company that Changed the World*. Lowney realised that the Jesuits priests of the sixteenth century have a lot to teach us today. Because the Society of Jesus was established in 1540 into a complex and dynamic world, it's hardly surprising that Ignatius Loyola

¹⁵ *Paradoxes of a Godly Man* by Philip Brewer

and his other founders valued the same attitude and behaviours that modern companies seek today.

Lowney sets out to discern what the Jesuits contribute to leadership wisdom. He concludes that the Jesuits don't tell us much we don't already know about what leaders do or what they achieve. But that they have a lot to say about who leaders are, how they live and how they become leaders in the first place. He says this model is a little different from most contemporary leadership models, differences that stand out include:

- We're all leaders, and we're leading all the time, well or poorly.
- "One great man" theories of leadership are shunned. Good leaders don't simply tell/persuade other people what to do, they equip them with the skills to discern on their own what needs to be done.
- Leadership springs from *within* and is not an act. It's about *who I am* and *how I live my life*.
- A leader's most compelling tool is who he or she is: a person who is anchored by certain beliefs or principles, who faces the world with a consistent outlook. i.e. someone who is authentic and lives a life of integrity.
- I never complete the task of becoming a leader. It's an ongoing process. The Jesuits were energised by the spirit of the *magis* – what more can I do?

The book observes that it is telling that when Ignatius Loyola set about writing the Jesuit *Constitutions*, he devoted two-thirds of document to guidelines for selecting and training recruits. The Jesuits wanted *quamplurimi et quam aptissimi* (as many as possible of the very best recruits). Every other aspect of Jesuit life was relegated to the last third. The message is simple: ongoing success depends on finding and training great recruits into leaders. If you can solve that problem, the leaders you have developed will solve every other problem for you.

The book gives fascinating accounts of the lives of great Jesuits including Francis Xavier, Christopher Clavius, Matteo Ricci, Roberto de Nobili, and many others.

As Chris Lowney sifted through their words and actions to find the themes that animated the Jesuits at their most successful, four principles of Jesuit leadership stand out. He calls them the four pillars of leadership.

1 Self-awareness

Key to attaining self-awareness is figuring out the core values and beliefs that motivate you as well as your strengths and weaknesses. Self-awareness can only be achieved through focused reflection on one's own experience. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the *Spiritual Exercises* to Jesuit culture.

2 Ingenuity

These were men constantly innovating and adapting to embrace a changing world, but anchored by non-negotiable values and a belief in a world of great opportunities with God labouring for them in all things. The story of how Matteo Ricci, in 1580, in his mission to spread the gospel, pioneered the radical strategy of 'inculturation' whereby he assimilated himself into Chinese culture, mastering the language, publishing a treatise in Chinese *On Friendship*, establishing his reputation as a scholarly man of virtue, constantly cultivating a network of well placed Chinese officials – nothing if not ingenious.

An audience with the Emperor may have eluded him, but such was his status in Beijing that he was the first westerner to be granted a burial plot in the imperial precincts, and his passing was marked by the gathering of a two thousand strong Christian community he had established in Beijing.

3 Love

Loyola exhorted his managers to govern with greater love than fear. In a school, a love-driven leader is someone who helps others find and fulfil their potential. Love binds individuals into supportive teams who rejoice in each other's successes. A love-driven leader is

someone who takes the time to share their ideas with other team members, but also someone who has courageous conversations when required. “Love-driven leaders work on the premise that people perform best when working with and for people who offer genuine support and affection.” But notice, the balance between love and fear – Loyola could be pretty frank with companions who didn’t do a good enough job – he loved them dearly, but they were clearly accountable for the work that they did and knew he would pick them up if they did not.

4 Heroism

Leaders are driven by the *magis*. “It’s a restless drive to imagine whether there isn’t some even greater project to be accomplished or some better way of attacking the current problem.”

The vision of Christopher Clavius, Jesuit mathematician and astronomer that Jesuits would become experts not only in theology and philosophy, but also languages, mathematics, and the sciences, moulding recruits into brilliant and most eminent men. This heroic ambition will have helped the Jesuits grow from the initial nine Companions of Loyola to 5000 men by 1580.

So, how did the Jesuits build the most successful religious company in history? Lowney concludes that each was a leader who knew himself, who innovated to embrace a changing world, who loved self and others, and who aimed high. Taken together and reinforced over a lifetime of practice, these four principles became for them a way of doing things, an integrated approach to life.

Much of the leading research today on organisational excellence resonates strongly with the four pillars Lowney attributes to the Jesuits.

Collins and Porras,¹⁶ two Stanford academics, found that, above all else, visionary companies

linked an identifiable ideology with an unrelenting drive for progress.

Warren Bennis, author of *Leaders*, also finds that vision and core beliefs spur innovation and creativity.

The paradox is that the ingredients for excellence lie in the combination of non-negotiable core beliefs on the one hand, and a willingness to embrace change on the other – two seemingly contradictory impulses but both essential as vital ingredients for outstanding performance.

McKinsey, perhaps the best known firm of global management consultants asked top executives of their clients what motivated their best talent:¹⁷

Values and culture	58%
Freedom and autonomy	56%
Job has exciting challenges	51%
Well managed	50%
High total compensation	23%
Inspiring mission	16%

So, what your colleagues stand for, how they treat each other and how they approach new opportunities is far more important to the best talent than the piece of paper which sets out some worthy mission statement.

What about leadership at Stonyhurst?

Jesuit schools throughout history were guided by the *Ratio Studiorum*, a very detailed account of all aspects of the pedagogical approach expected of Jesuit schools. *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*, a brilliant document written by a group of Jesuits from around the world in the 1980s, is perhaps the *Ratio Studiorum* for the 21st century. In this document the relevant characteristics of a Jesuit school are drawn out of the Ignatian worldview, the core beliefs of the Society. I will try and summarise this world

¹⁶ James Collins and Jerry Porras, *Built To Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*

¹⁷ McKinsey & Co. cited in *Heroic Leadership* by Chris Lowney

view that forms the bedrock of our mission at Stonyhurst (see appendix for detail).

We are all uniquely known and loved by our creator God, the one reality that is absolute. This invites a response (freely made) from each one of us. Jesus Christ, alive in our midst, is the model for human life, and our response to God’s love must lead to action. We must pursue excellence in all aspects of human life, reflecting on our activities in a constant search for greater service to God.

The educational characteristics and related guidance that then flows from this worldview influences the Jesuit school leaver profile for all Jesuit schools and indeed the Mission of Stonyhurst College. One of my key roles as deputy headmaster is to work with the headmaster to ensure that all decisions we make are rooted in this vision and that in sharing it with all staff, we encourage each individual to work out what it means for them so that it becomes the personalised mission of a self-motivated leader. When do pupils at Stonyhurst achieve their full potential? When they’re parented, taught, coached or tutored by those self-motivated leaders who engender trust, provide support and encouragement, uncover potential, and set high standards.

I had to include a quotation from a 16th century Jesuit about the travails of a school teacher:

“It is a repulsive, annoying and burdensome thing to guide and teach and try to control a crowd of young people, who are naturally so frivolous, so restless, so talkative, and so unwilling to work, that even their parents cannot keep them at home. So what happens is that our young Jesuits, who are involved in teaching them, lead a very strained life, wear down their energies, and damage their health.”¹⁸

So, as you can see, the challenges of 16th century teaching are no different from today! It can’t have been all that bad because within

¹⁸ Pedro Ribadeneira SJ quoted in *Heroic Leadership* by Chris Lowney

forty years of founding, their 150 colleges formed the bedrock of Catholic higher education in Europe.

A couple of years ago, I asked all of our teachers to take part in an exercise called *Curriculum 2020*. I gave them fifteen important aims of education – the first exercise was to rank them in order to reflect the priorities that they think we display right now at Stonyhurst. In the second exercise I asked them to rank them in order to reflect the aims that they think will be important in 2020.

Now (2011)	2020
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of social responsibility • Ability to pass exams • Spiritual values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual values • Sense of social responsibility • Adaptability and flexibility

So, going back to where I started, as you can see we are aiming to produce leaders in service of others, to the greater glory of God.

In terms of a few specific current leadership initiatives at the College:

- We have enhanced the mentoring programme of new arrivals into Lower Grammar (Y9) by pupils in Syntax (Y11).
- We have made some terrific enhancements to the roles and responsibilities of the Committee (our prefect body). We have had some exceptional letters of application (together with a reference) from current Poets (Y12_ setting out the contribution they think they could make as a Committee member next year.
- Our Arrupe programme and links with the Faith School in Liverpool and St Peter’s Kubatana in Zimbabwe are bringing our pupils face to face with justice issues.
- There is strong participation from pupils involved in alter serving and as Eucharistic ministers. The LTC and SCHAT committees across all playrooms mean that our pupils are very focused on raising money for charitable causes.
- We offer to our middle leaders at Stonyhurst College an in-house developed

leadership development programme aimed at unlocking leadership potential in support of our mission as a school.

As we proceed on this pilgrimage together with our pupils, we need to be constantly reminded of Loyola's regular exhortation to his companions; "no commonplace achievement will satisfy the great obligations you have of excelling."

Appendix – Ignatian Vision

taken from *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*

1. God is the one reality that is absolute; all other reality comes from God and has value only insofar as it leads us to God.
2. Each person is uniquely known and loved by God. This invites a response (freely made) from each person.
3. Sin means that the freedom to respond to God's love is not automatic. We are engaged in a struggle to recognize and work against obstacles to freedom.
4. Jesus Christ is the model for human life. He is alive in our midst and remains a Man for others in the service of God.
5. A loving and free response to God's love must lead to decisive action.
6. The Roman Catholic Church is the instrument through which Christ is sacramentally present in the world and in which the response to the call of Christ is made.

7. Ignatius insisted on the "magis" – the more. The concrete response to God must be "of greater value."
8. Ignatius attracted companions who became "friends in the Lord." The strength of a community working in service of the Kingdom is greater than that of any individual or group of individuals.
9. Through prayerful reflection on the results of their activities, the companions reviewed past decisions and made adaptations in their methods, in a constant search for greater service to God ("magis").



Andrew Gordon-Brown
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