

SERMON AT GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH 22 September 2013

by Rev John Clifford

REFLECTIONS on Leadership [authority, consultation].

“I'm the king of the castle, you're a dirty wee rascal.” Or, as it was used in my childhood in the States, “I'm the king of the castle, get down you dirty rascal”. This was used as a challenge while near the top of the 'jungle-gym' as others tried to pull you down while you pushed the challengers away. It was a very physical game and while I don't remember any broken bones, it was a great way to collect bruises.

When I led worship here two months ago, I spoke about the covenantal nature of society, specifically religious societies. I suggested that as religion was about commitment, our motivation for developing this commitment was a mixture of pursuing The Good and avoiding The Bad. To illustrate this I used the images of Heaven and Hell.

Today I'd like to reflect on Right Relationships in societies, specifically between members and leadership in society, and I use a children's game to illustrate. My reflections will refer back to Heaven and Hell in a sense, for these have become more descriptions of situations and states of mind than geographic locations; my reflections will also refer to both national institutions and local communities - obviously there are differences: some differences that relate to size; some that relate to purpose; some that relate to structure; but these shouldn't blind us to useful similarities. But I'd like to take the risk today that members and friends know of my honest caring for the welfare of our Unitarian communities over some decades, at international, British, Scottish, and local levels around the country. Over these years I have noted some patterns about Leadership that concern me and I offer some summary thoughts based on observations and I suggest that it might be helpful for you to reflect on how these thoughts about Leadership might apply to Scottish and Glasgow-based Unitarians.

To spell out my part of the message this morning, reminding you that you also have your part in this morning's message: 1. Leadership is important in any process; 2. Leadership is a function that doesn't reside inside the skin of one particular person, even a democratically elected one; 3. For Leadership to work, the dynamics of a group need to be characterised by what is sometimes called “Right Relationship”;

4. *Whether we consider ourselves to be Christian or not, we would do well to remember the words attributed to Jesus that the First shall be Last and the Last shall be First.*

Let's start by looking at Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion. This religious scholar has started a movement to bring the Golden Rule into people's ordinary relationships and into the running of civic institutions. In February 2008, she addressed one of the most high-powered intellectual annual gatherings on the globe: the Technology, Entertainment, Design Awards usually abbreviated to the TED Awards, prior to being herself awarded £100,000. Her address was in response to the annual question at this event: what can we do to help you make the world a better place. Now, wouldn't you want someone to give you £100,000 and ask you how you could be helped to make the world a better place?

Her "wish" was for help in bringing about a change in public attitudes to religion, long seen as the source of conflict in the world. She saw a common thread that united all religions, commonly called the Golden Rule, and she asked for help in setting up a sustained campaign to help individuals and societies implement the Golden Rule in their lives. The process would start with a declaration written by leading thinkers from many faiths and would focus on restoring "compassion" to the heart of religious and moral life, countering the voices of extremism, intolerance, and hatred.

One year later, in February 2009 a group of notable individuals from six faith traditions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, met in Switzerland to produce a final draft based on the contributions to a dedicated multilingual website using Hebrew, Arabic, Urdu, Spanish, and English. This final draft is called the Charter for Compassion and I'm sure many of you have come across it since our GA agreed in Swansea in 2011 to support and recommend it to our congregations - it has subsequently been reported on in our Unitarian periodical, the Inquirer, which pictured Karen Armstrong on the cover of that issue. The first of four paragraphs from the Charter is on the back page of today's Order of Service and if my droning on is hard to take, it will be something that you can read while you think of what you might contribute during our congregational sharing.

The Charter is more than a publicity exercise. Karen Armstrong has published what amounts to a Manual of Discipline for taking people step by step through twelve spiritual exercises designed to foster the

incorporation of compassion into daily life - not just religious devotion, but in one's business, social, and political life; in one's motivations and in one's decisions. If you have not had a chance to read her book, 12 Steps to a Compassionate Life, I recommend it highly.

But notice the process that has been used as Karen Armstrong pursues her goal: the breadth and depth of the consultation and collaboration that went into the drafting and promotion of the Charter for Compassion. She has exercised leadership through a process of consultation.

We are who we are, not just because of the way our physical needs for food and shelter have been met, but because of the way our social and community needs have been met; because of the way our spiritual needs for "inclusion" have been met; because of the way our need for a deep sense of direction and purpose in our lives has been and continues to be met. And we all need the genuine affirmation that comes from being heard, of being able to feel that our voice counts and has actually been listened to. This is so important to proper development that it should be considered a basic human right.

Whether we consider our national political processes or our local clubs, Leadership is an important part of creating, nurturing, and developing the important inclusive process that affirms members' sense of worth and connection. Strong leadership is not just about making decisions but about the robustness of the processes that lead to decisions. In civic society we expect that the processes will involve civility and respect to everyone in the process. In religious communities, I suggest, we have the higher standard of compassion for everyone in the process.

In Scotland we now have a year of national debate leading up to a very important decision about our future. The 'IndyRef' as the papers are calling it is a massive consultation process very different from the 1707 debate that took Scotland into the United Kingdom. Leadership in 1707 had virtually nothing to do with consulting the people affected by decisions but was based on a series of political barterings between those who exercised power. With the increase in ability to communicate and the extension of voting from a few thousand to millions, today's political leadership understands that the legitimacy of major decisions requires at least the façade of real consultation.

The news has been full of the turmoil and killing in Syria, Egypt,

Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon, and just this morning Kenya was in the news. The Americans and Europeans have trumpeted the advantages and importance of these countries becoming “democratic” in their leadership models. When Presidential elections are held and are seen to be 'reasonably' fair, we rub our hands and say, “Job done!” now let them get on with it and use their democracy to solve their problems. But the types of political consultation that characterised these countries for generations is more akin to our children's game of “I'm the King of the Castle!” Climb to the top of the pile and push everyone else down! This is particularly observable in Egypt and Afghanistan where those who “came to power” through a ballot box then confused the needs of their political party and political future as more important than the needs of the country.

But who are we to point a collective big finger? Until the current Westminster coalition came to power, the temptation in Parliament has always been to play “I'm the King of the Castle”! At least we in Scotland have a Parliament that is designed to promote consultation and cooperation, whether it succeeds or not. Democracy has been called the worst governing system in the world, made useful only by the fact that every other system is even worse. Actually, I personally think any system that doesn't build in proportional representation has a very shaky claim to being democratic.

At our Annual Meetings this year the John Rely Beard Lecturer was Rev Sheila Martin and her topic was “Who holds the power?”. It was a look at uses and abuses of power in congregations from the perspective of abuse of ministers, but the actual abusive practices were also done BY ministers and BETWEEN lay people. An abusive practice is not a one-off event, but a pattern and worryingly, several familiar patterns were mentioned, patterns I've seen at all levels of Unitarian practice over the years.

So this is your turn to share briefly with us what you think about leadership and community - to promote a good in your life or to avoid an evil. Both are necessary but take a few sentences to share your sense of good leadership with the rest of us.

[7 comments made by congregation]

Thank you to everyone who shared their observations with us.

Next week we celebrate 200 years since the passing of the act that officially “tolerated” the Unitarian heresy. Now, how good does it make you feel to know that you are “tolerated”? Still, it's better than

being persecuted..... Toleration is an important word in our heritage and maybe we could reflect on how we can improve our skills in this area when it comes to church life.

Our liberal approach is much more concerned with community and how we behave than with beliefs. As I said two months ago, Unitarians have never accepted the basic premise implied in original sin that we are fallen, i.e. that there was once a time when things were perfect but we have fallen and therefore need outside intervention because we cannot save ourselves. We recognise our fallibility but believe in progress.

Before I close, a few thoughts about why covenants are so important.

Alice Blair Wesley mentioned that word again: Covenant. A covenant is a mutual promise about intentions regarding how our community operates, not a credo of what the community believes. It is our promises to each other that create the kind of community that demonstrates tolerance and good-will needed for healing and growth. This is true in Glasgow, it is true in Scotland, it is true in Britain, it is true wherever Unitarians meet in an organised fashion. Certain qualities are needed for growth and we want growth - not necessarily growth in numbers, but growth in spiritual understanding.

Since the Jimmy Saville scandal we have all become more aware of how important it is to protect the vulnerable - the very elderly and the young. In spite of the GA pushing congregations to take action and develop effective policies and procedures on these issues, the response has not been good. We need to be caring communities where vulnerable people are safe.

But let us not forget that we are all, to some extent, vulnerable. We are all more fragile than we appear. So let us be careful with each other and put compassion at the heart of our relationships.

Being compassionate is even more important than being right.