Re-thinking Resilience in Leadership

Paul’s journey in 2 Corinthians

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| Verse | Possible Education Leadership Starting Points | Personal Reflections |
| *“We were under pressure, far beyond our ability to endure”* (1.8)  *“I still had no peace of mind…”* (2.13)  *“…we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within.”* (7.5) | Mental health, doubt, loneliness, lack of sleep, fear, anxiety/depression, dealing with challenging situations, isolation |  |
| *“I have laboured and toiled and have often gone with sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone with food…If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness”* (11.27, 30)  *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”* (12.8)  *“…do we need letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone.”* (3.2)  *“…through good report and bad report.”* (6.8) | Pressure, busy-ness, humility, defining reality accurately, hope, perseverance, character, resilience, bouncing back, suffering  Ofsted, inspection, chasing the grade, performance tables, long-term vision, parental pressure, ‘valuable but needing improvement’ |  |
| *“Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold”* (3.12)  *“Therefore since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lost heart.”* (4.1)  *“For we live by faith, not by sight”* (5.7) | Vision, boldness, passion, risk-taking, motivation, eyes of faith, values, calling/vocation to teach, unique gifting, team/community not individuals (all ‘we’ statements) |  |
| *“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!”* (5.17)  “Our hope for you is firm” (1.7)  “I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.” (7.16) | Personal faith journey, growth, affirmation of colleagues, references, pedagogy, renewal, repair, healing |  |
| *“But since you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”* (8.7)  *“Praise be to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us all in our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”* (1.3-4)  “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (4.18) | MAT, social justice, partnership, sharing resources, expertise, generosity, budget, networking, support, living well together |  |
| *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed.” (4.7-9)* | Re-thinking resilience, strength, hope, passion, reality check, faithfulness |  |

***“We were under pressure, far beyond our ability to endure”***

**(2 Corinthians 1.8)**

**[God of all comfort]**

In the passage preceding this verse, Paul uses the word translated ‘*comfort’* 5 times in his opening 7 sentences. An opening riff or at least his first point – it is the lens through which he wants his readers to see this intensely personal letter. It’s a difficult word to translate – meaning not simply comfort, but ‘to call someone to come near’, ‘to make a strong appeal or exhortation’ or ‘to treat in an inviting and friendly way’. This trio sound like a good list of basic principles for a line management meeting.

There is a greater depth and resonance in this word than we may first note - a recognition that the idea of comfort is not simply something that feels nice, or a glib 5-minute tear-drying exercise, but rather a richer ‘reaching out, walking with, kind of empowerment’ relationship – indeed the English word, from the French, gives a sense of **‘when we approach this together (*com-),* we are becoming stronger (-*fort)*’*.***

NT Wright, in his helpful *Paul for Everyone* series, imagines a scene in which:

*“one person is being with another, speaking words which change their mood and situation, giving them courage, new hope, new direction, new insights which will alter the way they face the next moment, the next day, the rest of their life.”*

Again, hardly a bad way of thinking about a pastoral meeting, parents’ evening or 1-2-1 with a colleague. In our most challenging school leadership moments, while it may be easiest (and usually seems quickest) to simply attempt to solve the problem (how can I fix this? or pedagogically, how can I get you to say the correct answer most quickly?), the idea of ‘comfort’ is not a patronising pat on the shoulder. Rather it is an empowering compassion, which through the acknowledgement of mutual suffering, the two parties are enabled to see sufficient hope to move forward together.

It is in this sense that Paul can write ‘*our hope about you remains firm (*1.7)*’*. This is what I need to hear when I am in my moment of need - that **despite what appears insurmountable, my colleague’s hope in me remains firm**. Hope steadies me as I stumble, particularly when that hope is given from someone who has themselves experienced the same challenge.

**[Our ability to endure]**

When Paul then goes on to explain his team’s challenges and sufferings, he highlights immediately one of the immense strengths of the human character - the ability to endure. The very phrasing of the sentence will be common to most school leaders, who if asked to call to mind the most challenging situations in their careers or personal lives or both, may use similar words – pressure, challenge, endurance etc. Wright’s translation draws out the metaphor more richly: “*The load we had to carry was far too heavy for us”*. It is a reality of school life – we may use phrases like ‘teaching load’ for example – by this a timetabler actually means the number of hours in a given week a teacher will be teaching, as opposed to a measure of mass or weight. However, in the increasing demands for efficiencies, many staff are now carrying a much more significant load than even 12 months ago – may this be beyond their ability to endure?

This however is our first glimpse in the letter of a more attractive and compelling vision for resilience – not simply to endure and get through, somehow riding the storm, putting up with things and hanging in there until retirement. If you asked 100 school leaders to write down the 3 moments in their career where their character grew most as a leader, it is highly likely that 300 challenging situations would emerge on the resultant post-it notes. These moments of suffering and challenge may never be longed for or chased down, but may be as Richard Rohr notes, *“Losing, failing, falling, sin and the suffering that comes from those experiences – all of this is a necessary and even good part of the human journey…”*. In Paul’s leadership journey, there is a growing understanding that the challenges (even those beyond his ability to endure) are that which:

1. Grow his character as a leader, his dependence on God, and his personal sense of hopefulness
2. Enable him to speak with credibility as a leader of a God who could possibly be thought of as a ‘comforter’ in the rich sense of Paul’s word here.

It is through the experience of pressure that the leader is thus equipped with scars and stories to empower others who need comforting. **By living through ‘the uncomfortable’, the leader becomes able to comfort others.** This socially enacted ‘resilience in relationship’ stands at the heart of any great team, or 1-2-1 working relationship – and is of course extended beyond the adults in a school to the classroom – where students *need* to see the teacher learning too, not simply doing and repeating.

For students who are ‘*under pressure, far beyond our ability to endure*’, the stronger-together idea of comfort will not come from people with solutions, but from relationships that demonstrate the comforter *has been there before* *and emerged*. Empathy in communication will characterise all forward-moving pastoral conversations, whether they are with 6-, 11-, or 16-year olds. It is almost as if **the challenge itself stretches and grows the students’ ability to get through** – almost like a muscle tearing and repairing itself stronger through effective training.

The road we are called down as leaders is not without challenge, obstacle or pain – in fact, if it weren’t, a leader perhaps wouldn’t be needed. But it is a journey during which we grow through the most difficult times more than any other, so let’s stop avoiding them. Statistically, there will be someone on your team right now going through something incredibly tough, personally, physically, professionally, with their mental health, with their family, with their finances.

It may be you. That’s OK.

As leaders under pressure, let’s begin to draw on a letter written by a man many years ago dealing with just that. The Christian faith is not a rose-tinted lens, or a crutch to help us through. In recognising our vulnerability as leaders, we may just build the trust and comfort of walking together we’re seeking in our teams, and endure beyond our own ability.