

Refining Judgement

Leaders are immersed in the drama of actual life in all its complexity, messiness, and difficulty. Leadership is usually under pressure. Hardly a day goes by without the need to face awkward people and problems. These cry out for wisdom, and that is rarely instantaneous: it needs to have grown over the years, with roots deep in what has been learned by others. Therefore the leader needs to be resourced deeply, while also alert to the reality of the present. Then comes the risky necessity of making judgements and taking decisions. Educational, ethical and environmental wisdom must lead into practical decision-making, often between two or more seemingly good choices. It acknowledges the strain of decision-making, and recognises the rarity of easy answers.

The Bible has many stories of leaders under pressure, and of their better or worse responses, such as, Jacob's covenant with Laban (Genesis 31), Moses taking Jethro's advice on sharing leadership (Exodus 18), Moses handling the issue of succession (Deuteronomy 31), Deborah's initiative against Sisera (Judges 4-5), Samuel's response to the popular demand for a king, with which he disagreed (1 Samuel 8), the personal story of Nehemiah of how he led the rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in the face of massive hostility, injustice and oppression (Nehemiah 2-6), and the complex dilemmas of spiritual leadership by one prophet after another, from Isaiah through to Zechariah. Distilled from all this experience is a rich body of wisdom literature in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and many of the Psalms.

Leadership in this tradition permits lament and anger, confusion and despair. It dwells in the chaos and cries out the biblical refrain – “Hear my cry for help, my God, for to you I pray.” (Psalm 5:2),

and, as the refining builds perspective, leans into the promises of God: “Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.” (Psalm 63:7). Wise judgement holds to the bigger picture and sees beyond the current day, term or year for a longer-term journey. As leaders refine their judgement, so their own character grows, formed in the crucible of the challenge. The New Testament inherits all that and takes it for granted, with illuminating accounts of the judgements involved in the ministry of Jesus (especially in the face of the pressure that led to his execution), in the growth of the early Church (in the Acts of the Apostles) and above all the inside story in the letters of Paul – perhaps the most innovative leader of that period.

Wise leaders in our schools seek to evaluate evidence carefully, and define their current reality accurately, however challenging it may seem. They take difficult decisions and treat the affected with dignity. They embrace risk, and frequently choose greater risk for the common good. They consult widely and read slowly. They often answer questions with another question, causing their teams to think for themselves. They recognise the injustice of resource distribution and fight for the young people in their care to get the very best opportunities, prioritising the most vulnerable.

Judgement is refined in relationship – “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). Wise leaders rarely fly solo but create networks and communities of practice on which they draw and to which they contribute. They recognise that refining frequently requires heat and pressure – “For you God tested us, you refined us like silver” (Psalm 66:10) – but that this pressure is easier to endure together than alone.

1. In what ways does wisdom in judgement which ‘holds to the bigger picture’ develop in leaders?
2. How do you deal with the ‘strain of decision making’ as an individual or as a team? What resources do you draw upon?
3. What role does prayer play in your leadership? Who could you talk to about this to develop it further?
4. If ‘as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another’, how can our relationships and networks help us share and permit ‘lament and anger, confusion and despair’ in making difficult decisions?