

The Courage not to Conform

Leaders lead. That does not mean to say that they don't follow. But what they follow is different from what most people follow. They don't conform for the sake of conforming. They don't do what others do merely because others are doing it. They follow an inner voice, a call. They have a vision, not of what is, but of what might be. They think outside the box. They march to a different tune.

Never was this more dramatically signalled than in the first words of God to Abraham, the words that set Jewish history in motion: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you."

Why? Because people *do* conform. They adopt the standards and absorb the culture of the time and place in which they live – "your land." At a deeper level they are influenced by friends and neighbours – "your birthplace." More deeply still they are shaped by their parents and the family in which they grew up – "your father's house."

I want you, says God to Abraham, to be different. Not for the sake of being different, but for the sake of starting something new: a religion that will not worship power and the symbols of power – for that is what idols really were and are. I want you, said God, to "teach your children and your household afterward to follow the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just."

To be a follower of Christ is to be willing to challenge the prevailing consensus when, as so often happens, nations slip into worshipping the old gods. They did so in Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. That was the age of nationalism: the pursuit of power in the name of the nation-state that led to two world wars and tens of millions of deaths. It is the age we are living in now as North Korea acquires and Iran pursues nuclear weapons so that they can impose their ambitions by force. It is what is happening today throughout much of the Middle East and Africa as nations descend into violence and what Hobbes called "the war of every man against every man."

We make a mistake when we think of idols in terms of their physical appearance – statues, figurines, icons. In that sense they belong to ancient times we have long outgrown. Instead, the right way to think of idols is in terms of what they represent. They symbolise power. That is what Ra was for the Egyptians, Baal for the Canaanites, Chemosh for the Moabites, Zeus for the Greeks, and missiles and bombs for terrorists and rogue states today.

Power allows us to rule over others without their consent. As the Greek historian Thucydides put it: "The strong do what they wish and the weak suffer what they must." The Gospels are a sustained critique of power. That is the conclusion I have reached when I read our sacred texts. It is about how a catholic school can be formed on the basis of shared commitment and collective responsibility. It is about how to construct a society that honours the human person as the image and likeness of God. It is about a vision, never fully realised but never abandoned, of a community based on justice and compassion,

Abraham is without doubt the most influential person who ever lived. Today he is claimed as the spiritual ancestor of 2.4 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims and 13 million Jews, more than half the people alive today. Yet he ruled no empire, commanded no great army, performed no miracles and proclaimed no prophecy. He is the supreme example in all of history of *influence without power*.

Why? Because he was prepared to be different. As the sages say, he was called “the Hebrew,” because “all the world was on one side and he was on the other” (Genesis 42: 8). Leadership, as every leader knows, can be lonely. Yet you continue to do what you have to do because you know that the majority is not always right and conventional wisdom is not always wise. Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Abraham and the followers of Jesus. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age.

That is why Abraham, at the start of his mission, was told to leave “his land, his birthplace and his father’s house,” to free himself from the pressure to conform. Leaders must be prepared not to follow the consensus. Warren Bennis (in his book *On becoming a leader*, Basic Books, 1989, 49), writes: “By the time we reach puberty, the world has shaped us to a greater extent than we realise. Our family, friends, and society in general have told us – by word and example – how to be. But people begin to become leaders at that moment when they decide for themselves how to be.”

Willingness to be different. Refusal to assimilate to the dominant culture? Convert to the dominant faiths of narcissism, materialism, secularism?. It is hard to lead alone, far less hard to lead in the company of others even if you are a minority.

To follow Christ is to be the counter voice in the conversation of today’s society. Are we prepared to do what the poet Robert Frost immortalised in *The Road Not Taken*, *Birches*, and *Other Poems*:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.

This is what makes a person a leader.