

Thirteenth Sunday of the Year

Dear Parishioners,

Last week the clergy from the various churches which are members of the ecumenical **Caversham Churches Together** were away on a 48-hour retreat in a most delightful wooded dale in rural Oxfordshire. Stanton House, adjacent to the quiet village of Stanton St. John, had spacious reception rooms, well-appointed bedrooms and a nice dining room. The Caversham clergy were the only guests. We decided to focus on the leadership roles thrust upon or willingly embraced by clergy, and reflected on what type of leadership was most consonant with our pastoral calling, especially given that we are all operating in parishes which are small and where the concerns of our people are heavily influenced by questions that are local.

It was generally admitted that there is a crisis in leadership in the secular world, both in the domain of business as well as politics. We asked ourselves whether or not those committed to our care actually wanted to be led, and we wondered whether it was to us they looked for direction. Many people ask where the world is going, some puzzle over what is happening to the Church and what future awaits it, and they do wonder whether the vicar, the minister or the priest has the answer. We did ask ourselves about the type of leader we are comfortable working with or under, recognising that we too are cogs in a bigger wheel and operate within a hierarchical system, however benignly administered. To help us focus on the profile of Church leadership, we turned briefly to the secular world.

We thought a lot about Theresa May and at the end of our time together the jury was still out as to whether she was an effective leader or not. We prayed for her and there were those who felt her understated style was actually symptomatic of good leadership: she is still in the saddle after almost two years! We also reflected on the leadership qualities demonstrated by Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, on the political courage of a number of his policy decisions, even if we had reservations about the recent referendum in Ireland. Having deduced something about what characterises good leadership in the secular world, we looked at figures who brought a religious vision to bear on their social concerns and for whom the kingdom of God was at the heart of their leadership profile. Pope Francis and his capacity to ruffle feathers cropped up frequently, but so too did Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Rowan Williams and Martin Luther King. We considered what it was in terms of personal qualities and policy priorities that made these figures such effective leaders. We thought too of Mother Teresa and how, albeit in a very different way but certainly a herald of the kingdom, she displayed leadership qualities. What was most wonderful about the few days is that we all got to know one another so much better, we laughed a lot, and we felt that our conversations and reflection equipped us to serve our congregations with a greater sense of purpose and enthusiasm.

Father Patrick