***The View We Get When We Lead from Behind***

Some of my happier moments have been on one of my many trips to the Holy Land. Every time I am there, I go someplace I have never been before and I go a familiar place mentioned in the Bible to gain another insight. One year I decided to visit with Bedouin Shepherds and to read, before getting there to be with them, all of the Biblical references regarding shepherds. As we know the Bedouins have a very long history, and by and large continue to be nomadic, which means that as they seek greener pastures for their flocks, we can see the interactions between the sheep and the shepherd. We can see the items they carry with them, as articulated in Psalm 23, and we can see how they have dealt with goats and wolves. Apart from the obvious things that one can learn, I discovered a very important principle: **a shepherd cannot lead from behind** **the flock**, nor does he meet with some and develop a job description based on their understanding of what it means to be a shepherd — based on the sheep’s opinion without experience. Put differently, often when clergy offer their opinion to some people, there is a resentment based on “Hey — you have no training in my field, Father.” But conversely everyone seems to have an opinion about what a priest is supposed to do. Many church conflicts are really a result of a clear misunderstanding of boundaries and specific areas of responsibility that are clearly defined and articulated and are to be found in writing.

I remember once having a lay person tell me that she was always taught that the priest handles the “religious” side of church life and that the Vestry runs the church. It was important to find out that this belief of a Chaplain, who works for a Board of Directors, plays out badly if this false dichotomy is really believed. Sadly, it is an unspoken reality for some, and it often is a result of leadership that leads from behind. One of the things, that the clergy learn early on, is that the parish wants a leader who is strong — that is, a priest whose personal issues do not spill over into the life of the parish. This is legitimate in one sense. We do not go to health care professionals, for example, in order to find out what their problems are. We go with an expectation of receiving help. Most laity are eager to have their spiritual needs met, and when they have a crisis or an emergency, they should be able to expect that their priest is available. If the priest begins his response to a need with, “You think you’ve got it bad, let me tell you about my…”. Not helpful!

Sadly, we Anglicans are living in a time where some Anglicans are importing non-Anglican terms to describe the roles of Clergy and Laity. When referring to the priest(s) in charge we have never used the term “Pastor, Executive Pastor, Sr. Pastor, etc.” One of the reasons we don’t is because it puts the priest into a potential conflict with laity who really do believe that the priest only handles the “pastoral” or “spiritual” side of the parish. The term Rector is a time-honored term because imbedded in it is the understanding of the ordained Leader who presides in numerous ways. The Rector may delegate any number of responsibilities, but he is still responsible. The Vicar, as is the case with a church that is not a parish, does the same as the Rector, however, he is immediately answerable to the Bishop, and if the Bishop is present for a meeting of the Mission church, the Bishop presides rather than the Vicar - who serves “vicariously.” In dumbing down our church terms, we have created confusion without realizing the consequences. The world in which we find ourselves has developed a very sophisticated vocabulary in technology, but many church people today must assume that these same people who have a rich vocabulary of technology terms must be too weak minded to understand our time-honored ecclesiastical terms which have a much longer history than cell phones! We were lighting candles in front of Icons long before people started clicking on icons on a screen!

Many clergy simply want everyone to love them. Many of the conflicts I have had to handle as a Bishop involve clergy who simply cannot say “no.” They are afraid that someone might be upset with them. They are afraid that someone will become angry and threaten to leave the church and take their money with them. They are afraid that someone might give them the cold shoulder. On the Myers-Briggs scale most Clergy are “I’s.” That is, most clergy are introverts, and introverts handle conflict very differently from extroverts. Without criticizing the M-B scale, let’s be clear that most people are actually “ambiverts” so many people are surprised when they learn that the Priest who stands at the Altar and stands in the Pulpit filled with enthusiasm and energy only appear to be extroverted. Ask them what they do on a Sunday afternoon and you may get a glimpse into whether they are an “I” or an “E.” The question is, how do they “recharge?” As a result, many a priest can write an excellent response to any number of matters with great eloquence, but put the priest into a meeting or put him into a live conflict and his internal responses are now often without the hours of planning he put into his letters: “I just want peace at almost any price. I want everyone to get along. I want you to make the decisions yourself. I hate this conflict. Why can’t everybody just get along with each other? I’ll simply do whatever the last person I speak with shouts at me.” The list goes on. The poor priest did not perceive a call to the priesthood because he loves conflict. He saw himself at the Altar or in the Pulpit. He did not dream of the day that he could chair a meeting, balance a budget, or ask people for money. Therefore, for some clergy it is simply easy to wave the white flag and pray and expect that all of the issues, problems, and conflicts will resolve themselves, because after all, people are reasonable and logical, and besides “these are Christians.” But that is leading from behind — “Let someone else handle it.”

To be sure, the church is a business, in one sense, therefore, good business principles are appropriate and necessary. Moreover, having people serve in their areas of strength, is essential or else the Gifts of the Holy Spirit cannot be used to build up the Body of Christ. Unless a priest were in the business world before ordination, seminary courses in parish management (Pastoral Theology courses) do not prepare a priest to be a treasurer or a fund raiser. But when the Body of Christ functions in a way that gifts can be used without the problem of a spirit of superiority, then the business side works well. In the end, though, the Vicar or Rector is still responsible, and if he wisely delegates, all the parts function and fit. But delegation is not a matter of leading from behind. The priest must articulate the vision, and the Bible clearly teaches us that without Vision we will perish.

On a Diocesan level, we have typically not fallen into the trap of using secular terms. Typically, we have a “Synod” instead of a “Convention.” Typically, we have a body which implements the actions of the Annual Synod called “Diocesan Council” indicating that it is tied in with a Diocese, and typically we have “Trustees” instead of “Directors.” The main reason is quite clear. We all share our experiences when we assume a new role, and if we use terms that are imbedded in the secular, we should never be surprised when secular behavior occurs. The Bible is very clear about how Christians handle conflict. In fact, in St. Matthew’s Gospel (18:15-17): 1. Go to the person with whom there is conflict. 2. If that doesn’t work take a few witnesses. 3. If that doesn’t work tell it to the church. 4. If that doesn’t work, well…. respond as you would to someone with whom you have natural conflict (tax collector, pagan) outside the church. This is not an example of leading from behind hoping that it will all work out. But part of our problem is that while Jesus has given us a way of handling conflict in the church, this is an alien concept for many church leaders including clergy. If it all could be handled as Jesus shows us, then why do we spend so much time in court and with attorneys and judges. Apparently, many Christians believe that if Christian principles don’t work get a good lawyer. In other words, let someone else outside the Church be the leader.

So, what does this have to do with Bedouin shepherds, and what have I learned as I watched them. 1. Even when the sheep graze with other flocks, they still respond to THEIR shepherd’s voice. 2. The shepherd always takes with him what is needed to defend and protect the sheep. At night I have seen the sheep surround the shepherd to keep him warm. 3. The shepherd does not ask the sheep how they want to be led. 4. No sheep stop responding to the shepherd because they don’t like the pasture land where he sets up his tent. 5. The shepherd does not turn over shepherding to the oldest sheep. 6. I have seen in the distance animals that looked like sheep which were wandering around close to the flock. Once they arrived, in spite of some similarities in appearance (in the Middle East) they were actually goats. 7. Each day as the shepherd sat at the “door” to the sheepfold, allowing each sheep to enter the sheepfold, he does an inspection of the ears and eyes and nostrils, looking for the dreaded weevil, and uses his oil to clean, calm, and heal. 8. At some point the shepherd has to deal with traders and those who barter, but he does not expect the sheep to fend for themselves.

If the shepherd would decide to lead from behind, first of all it is not the best view of the sheep, second of all then the sheep don’t know where to go and third of all they begin to disperse out of a lack of direction which produces confusion and can cause conflict between the sheep who then start finding their own way.

Being a priest today is not easy. There are many people far more intelligent and gifted than priests. But the sheep in the Middle East trust their Shepherd, never ask him to take an IQ test, and know that he has observed far more sheep than the sheep have, knows sheep behavior, and wants what’s best for his sheep. When the shepherd dies, I have seen what I guess I would call “sheep confusion” that comes from what we call a “power vacuum.” Suddenly wolves appear, and rush in, because now they can have their way with the sheep. It’s not easy for a new shepherd: I visited with one near Jericho once, but the new shepherd keeps his eyes clearly fixed on the best destination for his sheep, and in the end a new trust comes, but this will never be accomplished from leading from behind. It is an unattractive view and it produces chaos and confusion which leads to conflict and division.