

What makes a good leader is a question in the forefront of most people's minds these days. Many would argue that those who are getting the most air time are not necessarily the best examples of leadership. We tend to want to be entertained by our leaders, even if that means they exhibit appalling and even criminal behaviours.

I am not alone in believing that we are facing a crisis of leadership in our world today.

The prophet Isaiah, in today's Hebrew Scripture passage, refers to one of the great leaders of the ancient world - Cyrus the Great. Cyrus lived from approximately 600 BC to 530 BC. He became ruler over much of the middle east, from Persia, to Media, to Babylon and Judea. He was also referred to as "King of the Four Corners of the World".

Those who have studied Cyrus and his leadership will comment that he was a tolerant leader. What is meant by this is that though he was a follower of the god Marduk, he did not force subjugated peoples of the lands he conquered to adhere to his religion. Rather, he allowed them freedom to practice their own and some have suggested that he even learned from other cultures and religions to his own benefit and strength as a leader.

The bible tells us that Cyrus was the ruler, having taken over Babylon, who freed the Jews from their captivity, allowing those who wished to to return to Jerusalem and oversaw the rebuilding of the temple.

What is interesting, very interesting, is that Cyrus never recognized the Jewish God as his God. This passage in Isaiah says as much.

vs. 4 & 5 I call you by name, I surname you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me.

However, through the prophets Ezra and Isaiah we are told that God very much recognized Cyrus as God's "anointed". That is, chosen, blessed and used for God's purposes. This was not throughout all of his reign, as later texts tell us he fell away from God's favour, from promoting God's purposes.

What I love about this story and what I believe is good news for us is the truth that God uses all things for the good. I do not believe that God is manipulative or deceptive in this. Rather, I would suggest that within all of creation and therefore all people, there are elements of the Creator. Scripture tells us as much.

Genesis 1:27

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

And

Romans 1:20

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

This truth challenges us in a number of ways, especially in this time of leadership crisis.

It challenges us to pray for our leaders, knowing God can use them for the good, regardless of their own personal religious convictions. If ever there was a time in history that our leaders needed our fervent prayers, this is certainly one of those times.

I believe it challenges us to work collaboratively, or to promote such relationships, despite differences - be those differences religious, political or otherwise. In our current world difference is used as hard and fast lines to build walls. God seems indifferent to difference, in this context. We are rightly challenged to reconsider the “other” who may seem to have competing or completely antagonistic motives as someone to work with.

And I believe it challenges us to have a much more expansive faith. To believe that God is up to all sorts of things in our midst that may not look expressly ‘Christian’ to us. Could God be at work doing good things in the midst of those who follow other religions or no religion at all?

A dear friend of mine, Jen Harold, told the story of working two decades ago in the middle east for a Christian organization doing relief work. She was partnering with Muslim relief workers at the time. She was struck at a time in our history where there was a lot of fear and misinformation about Islam, by the faithfulness and goodness of these people. In fact, she commented, they struck her as more faithful to God than some of her Christian co-workers.

It is so true that God can do more than we can ask or imagine - and not just through us, but through all of creation. This is good and powerful news. And if we let our imaginations run wild with this truth, God will not be held back in our midst, despite the greatest failures of our leaders and ourselves.