



Talking about ... Political Leadership

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Power corrupts. I have heard that phrase a lot in recent conversations. Some have expressed this view when talking about the Conservative (and future Labour) leadership election; others have expressed the same view when discussing the last in the series of *Star Wars* films. Actually, taking the two together does help people to think about the nature of leadership – and possibly to be open to thinking about the importance of the Christian gospel.

Many political philosophers draw a distinction between two different goals of political leadership. Some argue that political leaders should focus on maintaining and distributing justice. This was particularly expressed by the Greek philosopher Plato, and is illustrated by the noble Jedi Knights in the *Star Wars* films. Others argue that political leaders should focus on efficiency in achieving growth and expansion. This was particularly expressed by the Italian philosopher Machiavelli, and is illustrated by Chancellor Palpatine who becomes the Galactic Emperor in *Star Wars*.

In his classic book *The Republic*, Plato (c.428–c.348 BC) proposed a form of society in which justice would be achieved and enjoyed by all – with everyone performing their duties and enjoying their rights. This, he argued, was a society in which everyone does what they are best suited for at their own level, and which is led by philosophers – referred to as ‘Philosopher Kings’. He derived this conclusion from his view that no one would do what is wrong if they knew what was right – and philosophers, above all people, would know what is right. Thus it was their superior knowledge and virtue that fitted them for

leadership. We can see echoes of this view in the Jedi Knights in the *Star Wars* films. They are an order of individuals that have the ability to connect with and use the Force. They live a virtuous life of sacrifice, without material possessions or emotional attachments, following the Jedi code which requires them to develop their wisdom and insight.

In his book *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1469–1527) argued that political leaders do not need virtues but rather what he called ‘virtù’ – meaning vitality or power. He proposed that leaders should do whatever is necessary to exercise their power in order to achieve success in growth and expansion. He particularly admired the Romans for the way they extended their power across the world.

Again, we can see many echoes of this view in the life of Chancellor Palpatine in the *Star Wars* films. In the course of the first three episodes, we see Palpatine extend his power from Senator to Chancellor of the Republic, then being given dictatorial emergency powers to deal with Count Dooku's rebellion and finally proclaiming himself Emperor of the Galaxy, dissolving the Senate, establishing the Galactic Empire and assuming complete power over the inhabitants of the galaxy.

These parallels in the *Star Wars* films not only illustrate the views of Plato and Machiavelli, but also their dangers. Here we see the Jedi so absorbed in their own virtue that they cannot see what happens around them. Similarly, one could argue that leaders who view themselves as superior will inevitably become detached from the real world and real people around them. Meanwhile, it gradually becomes clear that Palpatine is actually Darth Sidious the prime practitioner of the Dark Side of the Force. Similarly, one could argue that the deception and manipulation often referred to as Machiavellism is not so much a misrepresentation of Machiavelli's philosophy (which is what some argue), but is actually the inevitable consequence of it.

If both of these arguments are true, then neither the Philosopher Kings of Plato nor the power-focused rulers of Machiavelli are good models for leadership. Some would argue that democracy is the solution to this in both cases. Unlike monarchy or aristocracy, democracy gives us the

ability to remove leaders who have become self-absorbed and detached, or deceptive and manipulative. Others have less confidence in democracy – citing the example of Hitler who, like Palpatine, was elected democratically (although some would deny this, arguing that he actually came to power through back-room deals).

Whatever our level of confidence in democracy, when we think about the kind of leaders we need we might be able to look more deeply at the problem. Perhaps what we see with Plato and Machiavelli (and what is illustrated in *Star Wars*) is the fundamental issue of the corruption of the human heart. Perhaps we might consider that what all leaders need is a change of heart. It's worth thinking about Jesus who demonstrated a different form of leadership and offered the way to bring about a radical change in our lives: 'Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mark 10:45, NIV)