

'El jefe? Not me!' – Acts 14: 8-23

When I was a university student, I was lucky enough to be part of a group from the university that went to Central America to make a documentary film. There were four of us, me, and my friends Hing, Peter and Paul.

We spent several days filming in a small village and pretty quickly everybody who lived there had met us. Then we found out that they had given us all nicknames. Hing was 'el Chino' for obvious reasons; Peter they called 'el monje', meaning 'the monk' because he was so quiet and Paul was given the name 'el gallo' meaning 'the cockerel' for reasons which we didn't understand at first but gradually dawned on us the longer the trip lasted.

I was given the name 'el jefe'; meaning 'the chief'. I rather liked being called 'el jefe'. We were a very collaborative group and we worked well together but actually I suppose I did sort of become the group leader by default and that is how the locals saw me. Hing deserved a better name than one that referenced his ethnic background. He was the one who spoke good Spanish and as well as translating everything he was good at finding stuff out. And he knew most about film editing. But there you go. If he minded he never let it show.

When Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra and healed the man who could not walk, the people of the city decided that Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes. So, interestingly, they assigned to Barnabas the role of 'el jefe'. We are used to thinking of Paul as the big personality of the early church but the people in Lystra discerned that Barnabas was the big cheese.

Paul and Barnabas protested that they were not gods but ordinary human beings and they suffered for it. Having refused the status that the city wished to confer upon them they broke the spell and made themselves vulnerable to their opponents. Paul was stoned and left for dead.

It was important to Paul and Barnabas that they were not treated as gods first and foremost because they were not gods. But neither did it suit their purpose to be treated as gods. Their purpose was to proclaim the good news, establish a church and then leave to go to the next place and start the process all over again. The church in Lystra would be built with ordinary human beings who lived in Lystra. It was not to be a cult built around the founder/leaders.

All church leaders need to be encouraged and congregations seem to know that instinctively. Ordained ministers, in particular, become used to hearing nice things being said about them. We are sent to preach good news and share God's love; of course people like that and transfer these feelings onto us as people.

Now that our church has moved online, the comments made on Facebook are there for all to see. They are all positive and welcome. Some of the ones I have received focus on how good I am at being a priest. Of course, I love these comments but I also know that there is danger in them because we are building the church of Jesus Christ and not a cult around whoever is the vicar at the moment. Not least because one day this vicar will leave the parish, as all vicars do.

This is one reason why it is so important that church leadership is a very collaborative affair. Collaboratively led churches put down roots in their communities. They survive and endure. Collaboration takes time and sometimes becomes fractious and we may find ourselves yearning for a benevolent dictatorship from somebody everybody respects, maybe somebody like Barnabas! But

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behind this desire for strong leadership, I suspect lurks a desire for the people we don't agree with to be told what's what.

Paul, who was only seen as the mouthpiece of Barnabas by the people of Lystra; the monkey not the organ-grinder; gave us the wonderful Spirit-inspired image of the church as a human body which needed all its parts equally to function properly.

This is the image we must project to our community. And as we seize the opportunity and challenge of proclaiming the good news online, we need to make sure that this is the image that we project; both of the church and of the Kingdom of God. Maybe we need to be thinking about how we get more faces onto our Facebook pages, not just those of ordained ministers!