

Holy Communion 2nd after Trinity. St John and St Stephen's Reading. 09.06.24

1 Samuel 8:4-11; 16-20, Mark 3:20-end The people ask Samuel for a King.

Sermon: Can you trust leaders?

As we approach the General Election next month, we might like to be alert to the story of Samuel and the first king of Israel, Saul.

Over the next four Sundays, this story is brought to us by the Lectionary, and if you're not familiar with it, it might be good to re-read it, or read it for the first time, to get a flavour of how God's people saw their rulers and how this linked in with their faith in God as their ruler.

So this talk asks the question: can you trust leaders?

Leaders come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, as this selection shows (slide 1). Can you name these ones?

From earliest times, God had asked his people to trust him as their leader. By the time we come to Samuel, they have been delivered from Egypt by Moses; roamed the desert for 40 years; been led into Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey by Joshua and had a period of lawlessness under various judges, of which Samson was the most famous (slide 2).

After the disastrous period of the Judges, the Lord raised up Samuel as his prophet. As a result of Hannah's faithfulness, Samuel grew up in the Temple, trained in the art of hearing God's voice. His name meant 'God is listening'. So it was hardly surprising that when the people came to him and asked for a king, which is the substance of today's passage, he knew immediately they were on the wrong track.

It sounds like a reasonable request – the people want a king to rule over them like the other nations have. But Samuel doubts their motivation, and is right to. 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them', says God.

From the start, God asked his people to be different – set apart. He led them via the patriarchs, via Moses, Joshua and Samuel. This made them different from the surrounding nations, in a good way. But so much easier, on the face of it, to look to an earthly ruler, with chariots and soldiers; so much more tangible than an invisible God who guides through prayer.

Someone has said we get the leaders we deserve. Certainly in a democracy, we get the leaders we vote for – although we can argue that some voting systems deliver this more effectively than others.

If God gave them a king despite their request being suspect, that raises theological questions about how much agency we have in our relationship with God. We are asked to listen to God: but he listens to us. To what extent does he let us choose our life's path and to what extent are we responding to something set before us already? Some of the best stories in the OT feature a high degree of reciprocity – think

Abraham pleading for Sodom, Moses asking God not to destroy his own people; Mary saying her 'yes' to bearing Christ. It's not all one-way traffic.

As for kingship – this story makes us wonder if kingship wasn't originally part of God's plan. Or was God going to bring in kingship later, just not at this point? We've inherited, as Christians, a rich tradition of the faithful monarch, who models God for us in the world, but the OT also contains a great deal about faithless rulers who rely on physical strength and oppression to get their own way. The Messianic hope was that a good and faithful king would deliver his people from oppression. Millenia after 1 Samuel was written, we think of Jesus as the anointed one who offered himself for the life of the world.

Jurgen Moltmann, the great German theologian who came to faith in a British prisoner of war camp, died this week. The following quotation from him, borne out of years of reflection on World War II, reveals his personal insights into the sort of rule that God had in mind for his Messiah: *The messianic hope was never the hope of the victors and the rulers. It was always the hope of the defeated and the ground down. The hope of the poor is nothing other than the messianic hope.*

The Messiah was never meant to be invoked by the oppressors, but was always on the side of the oppressed – or at least of the humble. So kingship as a theological concept is rather full of contradictions in the bible.

So, returning to the story of the people and Samuel: what happens when we ask for something that's not God's best? Or do God's plans evolve depending on the behaviour of human beings? Does God sometimes let us go down a path that's not ideal, all the while watching and waiting so that when we realise it's a dead end, we can find our way back? Or is he continually starting again from the present moment as he invites us to take part in the dance of our own lives?

There are also interesting theological points about judgment in this story. Some of the OT can read as though God randomly brings judgment, but in this case, they certainly bring it on themselves. The pattern seems to be that the way of *Life* is set before people, but if they choose some other way, they have to live with the consequences. We don't live in a consequence-free universe. The complication is that when someone choose a toxic path, someone else is normally also caught up. Such is the way of being human.

For the Israelites, asking for a king is going to bring all sorts of things that are not so desirable: taxes, conscription, even slavery. But the real reason God is provoked, is that their request betrays a lack of trust in God. God makes this clear to Samuel: 'Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.' And later he says to the Israelites: 'And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'

Unlike in the Exodus, when God heard his people's cry and delivered them, in this case, they will reap the fruit of their own fearful and faithless decision. Fast forward, and we know this pattern of choosing to reject God eventually led to Exile. And that's the reciprocal nature of God's relationship with his people. He doesn't force us into a certain way of life; but our choices do affect our lives. And the choices of leaders affect more lives than most.

Have you ever prayed for something and God has not answered in the way you hoped – but afterwards, you realise how grateful you are God saved you from your own request?

Finally, let's think about our own relationship with leaders. At the risk of me getting on one of my hobby horses, I wonder if you ever look at the parish profiles of churches in vacancy that one can read weekly in The Church Times?! It tells you a lot about the church. What kind of leader/vicar/priest do the people want? Many hours are given over to this question, and generally I think the longer the person spec. in the advert, the more one proceeds with caution. We can easily fall into the trap of thinking that all the things that so far haven't happened in the church will magically be delivered when the new leader comes.

Even Jesus' own family projected onto Jesus the sort of person they thought he should be. When the crowds got so big that he and his disciples couldn't eat, they set out to forcibly remove him from his audience. The Scribes thought he had a demon. That's quite a large mis-match between how Jesus saw himself and how everyone else did. As an anointed leader, Jesus acted according to God's will, not meeting spurious requests willy nilly.

As we approach the General Election, what sort of people are needed to lead us, and how much trust can we actually put in them?

Not living in a theocracy, it's a balancing act for Christians as to how much hope is placed in political systems and how much in God. How do the two things coincide? Our common sense and our reading today tell us it's unlikely God will magically overrule the bad decisions that our leaders make on our behalf. We all reap the consequences of the policies and actions of our leaders. That's why being engaged politically is important.

Two things to avoid then, as we go to the polls and live with the consequences: 1. Putting them on a pedestal. When we put people on a pedestal, we place unreasonable demands on them. Psychologists would call it projection. If you're on a pedestal, you're more likely to be faced with the temptation to believe the pedestal is your rightful place – and when you inevitably muck up, as we all do – there will be a long way to topple.

2. On the other hand, let's not demonise our leaders. It's good to call out bad behaviour – remember Saul was wont to throw the odd spear when he was having a bad day, and only the harp playing of the king in waiting, David, could soothe his rage. But leaders are human, and often they get caught up in inhuman systems that end up robbing them of their initial vision. It's always struck me as very notable that former leaders (with some exceptions) say some really good things after they're no longer in office.

And some leaders are monsters. Jesus knew this: he dismissed Herod as 'that fox' and otherwise ignored him.

So - trust God and go to the ballot box. Amen.

