

**Pentecost 3**  
**17/6/2012**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13**

**Psalm 20**

**2 Corinthians 5:6 – 10, 14 – 17**

**Mark 4:26 - 34**

**God, who does not see as mortals see, starts again with us**

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The reading from Samuel marks a new chapter in Israel's tradition of faith. Having lived for many years as pilgrims, with God as their only sovereign, the people arrived at the point where they wanted to establish a monarchy. There may have been some reluctance about this. The negative memory of the kingly rule exercised by Pharaoh in Egypt was deeply embedded in Israel's faith story. The new idea arose once the people became settlers and saw how other nations were run. Was this a status thing? Did it arise out of frustration because this emerging settler society could not get their governance right? And for Israel there was a theological question: if the people had their own king, how would the sovereignty of God be recognised and exercised? At the point where the first reading enters the story the Spirit moved in the prophets who spoke the word of the Lord that gave the people direction.

Earlier Samuel warned the people of the difficulties having a king would bring them. *He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots... he will make them plough his ground and reap his harvest... he will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks... he will take the best of your fields and olive groves and give them to his courtiers... he will take the best of your slaves and your donkeys and cattle, and put them to his own work... and you will cry out because of your king, but God will not hear you* [1 Sam 8:14 – 18].

The people refused to listen to Samuel, and Saul was anointed king. He was not a success and after some difficult years, the text says God rejected him. The Spirit moved Samuel to go to Bethlehem in search of a new king whom the Lord would show him. He examined seven of Jesse's sons without success and at the last minute the eighth and youngest son David returned from tending the sheep. He was the one the Spirit had chosen. In the sacramental act of anointing, Samuel, David the shepherd boy and the God of Israel were bound together in a destiny that brought a new dispensation to the people. Despite its difficulties and failures this regime was foundational for the future: in reality and symbolically. The anointing of David created a ruler who allowed himself to be directed by the strange world of God. A new idea of Kingdom and kingship was seeded here that was to grow into something vast and all embracing. This came to epitomise what rule according to the Spirit of God was meant to look like, because it was kingship founded on a heart open to God. All of this entered into the discourse about monarchy and church and state relations that affected the world for centuries to come.

But there is something else here. In this story an underlying contour is exposed that affects the shape of our faith, and ultimately the way people of faith expect to live in the world before God. The pattern found here can be discovered over and over again in scripture: God does not work according to human expectations. God chose the least likely candidate whose only qualification for the job was that he had the heart for it. David was not a celebrity. He came from the margins, where you can find

beautiful people, but in that place there are also little people, hidden ones who have a potential for greatness. God was not moved by David's outward appearance. Nor did David have any prerequisites for monarchy such as experience in high-level decision-making, a PhD in political science or an MBA in Government. His one qualification was that he had the sort of heart God was looking for. He was receptive to God and to the ways of God in the world.

David later demonstrated profound human weaknesses but his name still captures the ideal of biblical kingship. When things went wrong, his willingness to return to living in openness to God is notable. The Spirit of God sought him out and raised him up. He responded to a higher calling and came in from the margins to live a new life based on a grace given to him.

There are links between the pattern seen in David's story and what we know about Jesus. He was born on the margins; he was a refugee and outcast. He was named and claimed in his Baptism but his own did not receive him. And when he died, it was an unbelieving outsider, a Roman soldier who declared: *Truly this man was a Son of God* [Mark 15:39]. Those in holy orders did not speak like this. They had helped put him to death. It is no wonder Jesus' parables speak of the way God's work is typically hidden and ambiguous. God's Kingdom grows in darkness and is found amongst the smallest things. It's work takes place at the opposite end of the scale from what we expect. Those who hold high or holy office may actually play no part in God's real activity in the world.

The parables of the seed and the sower do not hide these difficulties. They are coded stories designed to tell those who can see it, that despite every thing to suggest otherwise, the seeds of God's new regime of life and hope have been sown in the world. This regime, born of the creative Spirit that flows from the heart of God to us, not only offers hope for living, it reveals a pattern that faithful people are called to heed. This pattern gives us grounds for optimism, not on the basis of human ideas of progress or success. But optimism that sees beyond the limits we set on life to behold a love with the capacity to transcend normal expectations and embrace all people in gracious, generous, accepting hospitality, as depicted in the tree in which many birds came to nest [Mark 4:32].

This is refugee Sunday and we who seek to live in the light of these stories are challenged to embrace the reality they proclaim. God does not work according to worldly standards. God works amongst the least to bring wholeness and fullness of life, in place of disruption, disappointment and death. That means that despite the set backs, the difficulties and our unfaithfulness God, who does not see or measure as mortals see, comes to give us a second chance at life. The art of living is captured in understanding that what God wants to see is life lived according to the pattern of love we have received in Jesus Christ. A pattern that shows itself in lives that reach beyond the barriers we put in place to protect our own success so that others can have the chance to start again. Lives in which hearts are open to the challenge of living, not for ourselves, but for him who loved us to such an extent that he changed places with the least. He became a refugee and an outcast so that the seed of new life would be planted in the earth, life with the capacity to grow and develop, and make space for many to find a home in the branches of its generosity.

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