

Sunday 11
14/6/2015

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 8:1-21

Psalm 138

Mark 4:26-34

Give us a king!

In modern western societies which still concern themselves with kings and queens, the principle function of royalty seems to be to have babies, in order to increase magazine sales from the supermarket check-out aisle.

This being the case, it is not straightforward for us today to appreciate what is going on in Israel's request for a king, and the shock this creates in Samuel and in God. There is a failure of some kind taking place here. But the *nature* of the failure is rather less clear than the simple fact of it suggests, and this is not least because the kingship becomes such an important part of the way in which God relates to his people.

But before we get to that, it is worth thinking a bit more about what is taking place in the request for a king itself. Why the request for a king, and what exactly is being rejected? Most fundamentally, the request for a king is a request for a kind of security which has been lacking in Israel up until now. Since the time of their arrival in Canaan, the Israelites have basically been a loose confederation of tribes with not much binding them together other than some common beliefs, stories, practices and language. From time to time, when there have been crises, certain figures known as "judges" were raised up to respond to particular issues, and then disappeared again from view. Samuel is effectively the last of these judges. In the face of harassment from local warlords and more organised groups such as the Philistines, the sense that Israel needed something more substantial and reliable than the occasional strong leader was a natural one. They first looked to Samuel's sons, but saw that they were not up to the task. The prospect of a kind of dynasty of prophets or judges not being realistic, the request for a king is the natural next step.

When the request is made, the first things we hear are Samuel's lament, and God's – both feeling rejected by this request. The warnings are given to Israel – effectively, "be careful what you pray for" – but the request is, somewhat surprisingly, granted, and God already has in mind the man he wants to do the job.

While it is clear, then, that the Israelites are seeking some political security in their request for a king, what exactly is the theological crisis this creates? What is *wrong* with this? God claims that his own kingship is being rejected – which we have to take at his word. But in what way could God be in any helpful sense "king"? The language of God as king, or King Jesus, is familiar enough – it is right through our hymns this morning – but what it actually *means* is much less easy to say than it is common to say it.

Something of what the people are rejecting is suggested in what they expect the king to do: the king is to "govern us and go out before us and fight our battles" (v20). Gods are not particularly reliable when it comes to these practical matters. Who today would want "God" running the economy, directing the troops, or setting social policy? Even if we did like the idea we would not be likely to agree that God's "helpers" in these matters were doing what God required, and therefore not be likely to agree that God *is* actually in charge.

It seems, then, that the people bring to Samuel a necessary but impossible request. Good order is necessary for the well-being of the people, and they seek such good order and security, but it is impossible that good order flow from something other than God.

And *yet* God grants the people a king. Why? Because God is able to work without a king, or with one.

We get a sense from the text that God is almost indifferent to the mode of government the Israelites ask for themselves. The failure of the people is not so much their request for a king but the naïve belief that life under a king would be any better than life as they have already known it (vv10-18). The rejection of life under the judges and prophets is thought by the people to be the choice of a *better* life under a monarchy – a centralised governance, rather than a co-operative one; an established political order rather than one which needs constantly to be re-negotiated by tribal leaders.

The stories told in the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, of course, relate just how unhelpful a monarchy can be. Life for the people of Israel doesn't seem to be any better under the kings than under the judges. But this is not the end of the story. For even though God begrudgingly grants the people's request, the kingship becomes one of the central motifs of the Scriptural story. God chooses the first kings – Saul, who is soon rejected, and then David, to whom God promises an eternal future. On account of this promise, the language of kingship becomes part of the theological language and expectations of Israel. And so the kingdom – or kingship, reign – of God comes to central to the preaching of Jesus, a thousand years later. The identification of Jesus as Son of God, Christ and Messiah is a use of royal language from the kingship tradition to identify what it is Jesus embodies and represents (re-presents): to say that Jesus is "Son of God" is not so much to say that God is his "Father" as it is to say that Jesus is *king*.

The request for a king is a catastrophe because it rejects the order of things up to that point, understood to have been ordered in that way by God. In this sense, God is rejected. But perhaps even more catastrophic is the imagining that a different ordering would be more godly, more likely to give us what we think we need, just because it *is* a different ordering. The mistake is not simply failing to trust God but putting too much trust in our own sense of what we need – thinking that we need only to imagine a different future, and that our imagining makes it righteous.

As we noted at the beginning this morning, kings and queens are not much to us these days. But deciding for a better future does matter to us: having it better, as "the world" seems to, being safer, more comfortable, these are constantly on our minds.

As we reflect as a Synod on the future of the church we are, in a sense, seeking a "king, like the nations". Once the review is done, we will be better placed to move forward, stand on firmer ground, be safer. Perhaps we will. The point is simply that "strategy" and "sustainability" are supremely kingly concepts.

As we reflect as a congregation on our future accommodations, how best to use the resources we have, we are doing the same thing: seeking stability, security. We are seeking sustainability by strategy in the same way as the Synod, only on a smaller scale.

It is not that we *must not* do this. Created in God's image, we do as God did: we create, we shift things around, we change our world. The point is, though, that *to decide* – to choose one way of being rather than another – is not to make ourselves more righteous; it is to throw ourselves on the mercy of God. That is, to decide is to ask that God make

good the work of our hands, whether the demand for a king or the development of a new risk management regime.

The form of our life before God is much less important than the God himself before whom we live. With a king, or without a king, with clear strategy or living wholly (holy?) unsustainably, the question of God's relationship to us and ours to God does not change, only the form in which the question is put.

For this God will take whatever shape we give ourselves and make of it both a means of judgement and of grace. It is for us simply to receive that judgement and that grace, to confess and to give thanks, and so to give glory to the God whose ways are not our ways, and whose very difference from us is the possibility that we might be blessed with more than we could have expected.

This is the God we worship – the God who loves us as we are, that we might become so much more. For this God's love and devotion to us, despite all our twistings and turnings, all thanks and praise be given. Amen.

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