

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Psalm 130

Mark 6: 1-13

God's saving judgement

As I was growing up in the late sixties and early seventies, one of our household institutions was to pause soon after lunch before the television to hear the (almost?) immortal lines: "Like sands through the hourglass, so are the days of our lives", and then to sit through the next engrossing episode of the classic soapy. (Or, I assume that they were engrossing, because I don't think we missed many when we were home!) As much as those opening lines have been parodied, in fact they reflect a deeply-rooted philosophy about life. It's not a very good philosophy – and its outworking is seen in the worst manifestations of soap opera – but it has a strong hold on us: the times of our lives are sand upon sand upon sand.

As we follow the story of the kings of Israel, we might ask: Is this another soap opera? With our reading this morning we come almost to the end of the story of Israel's first king – Saul. We have skipped over a large section of the narrative, most of which has had to do with the pursuit of David by the increasingly envious and threatened Saul. If you have read the skipped material in the last week you might have a question about the sincerity of the passion and sorrow which fills David's song of lament as we have heard it today, as David has spent most of the last 14 chapters or so trying not to get killed by Saul.

And yet, David is not being inconsistent here. Despite the fact that he knows himself to have been anointed by Samuel as the one to succeed the king, David has continued to honour Saul as Israel's king. Twice David has had Saul in hand – a sitting duck, as it were – and both times he chose to use the opportunity as a means of illustrating to Saul that he constituted no threat to the king and that the king was pursuing him unjustly (1 Samuel 24 and 26). When his own men castigate David for not taking advantage of having Saul at his mercy, his response is that he would not presume to kill the Lord's anointed (1 Samuel 26.9). Our reading this morning has also conveniently skipped over the ghastly story in which the messenger who brings the news of Saul's death falsely claims to have killed the king at the request of the mortally wounded king himself; David has the messenger himself executed for having presumed to do what David himself refused to, even if Saul did request it (See 1 Samuel 31.1-2 Samuel 1.16). All of this is simply to say that, whatever we make of David's song of lament, he is not being two-faced here; he has honoured, perhaps even loved Saul as king, even though David himself has been promised that the kingship will be given to him.

But at the same time we should be wary of any impression that Saul is exalted as a fallen hero here, given the wider context of the narrative. He has been rejected as king by God on account of disobedience and told that another will take his place.

"Historically", we might say that Saul dies at the hands of the Philistines in a military miscalculation. At that level his death is tragic, and perhaps even heroic and certainly a devastating blow to Israel. Theologically, however, Saul dies because he was destined no longer to be king. Saul, then, is *supposed* to removed from the picture, and God has presumably been in the process of painting him out ever since Samuel delivered the bad

news to the rejected king. Saul falling on his own sword is God's final stroke across that part of the canvas. In making sense of David's lament, then, we have to reject any thought that here we are dealing with a lament over a fallen hero. This would be to read the Scriptures as confirming that common habit we have of telling none of the *bad* stories about the deceased at his or her funeral, as if having died in particular way – or even just having died – constitutes a righteousness which obviates everything that has gone before. The Scriptures are not so disingenuous: Saul reaps what he has sown. He dies not because the Philistines had a stroke of good luck but because God abandoned him.

But what, then, is the meaning of David's magnificent song of lament? With its three-times repeated refrain "how the mighty have fallen", the lament lends itself to all kinds of borrowings to express grief in response to the demise or decline of any of *our* great ones, but this is not to use the lament in a way true to its use in the story. Central to a proper understanding of the lament is the meaning of the kingship itself in Israel, and in the ancient near East more generally. Whereas in our more individualistic age we are likely to hear David's song as a eulogy for Saul himself, in its context it is much more than this. The relationship between the king and the people over whom he reigns is such that what happens to the king happens to the nation. Thus David sings of Saul as the slain "glory of Israel". This is not about Saul in himself but about Saul *as the king* – as that which for which the people had asked, in which it sought to find it security and strength. What is lost here is not only the man Saul but the hope of Israel – that in which it chose to trust. The death of the king is the end of the dream. But, as we have seen, neither is this simply an accidental thing, as if Saul might have survived to die of old age if perhaps he hadn't ventured out that day. If the king has failed so also has Israel who trusted in the kingship. There is a judgement here which is executed not only upon Saul but also upon Israel. And so we have here not simply a loyal man mourning the death of his king, but rather a lament over Israel itself – both glorious as chosen and blessed by its God, and yet also rejected in judgement as it itself has rejected God (1 Samuel 8). David's song for Saul is God's own song for Israel: How the mighty have fallen.

Most importantly, however, this song is sung not just by anyone, but by God's own solution for the problem of the kingship – David himself. The lament rises in response to an executed judgement. Yet, the overcoming of the judgement is as close as the lips which sing this very song.

And this brings us to something much more important than the mere historical details of who was king and when. Here we encounter the particularly Hebrew-Christian conception of sin and judgement: that sin named and judgement enacted are sin forgiven and judgement overcome. History is written by the winners – so the saying goes – and the Hebrews had come to understand themselves as the winners, in that God had found a way to turn their grief into gladness, their death into life. The request for a king was a failure on Israel's part, and yet God would turn the kingship into a means of grace. This is not because of the possibilities of the situations themselves, but because of who God is.

Here the way in which God related to Israel through Saul and David becomes relevant to God's relating to us here today. We don't worry much about kings these days, but we have a strong sense of "better" and "worse" in our personal and community lives. We might imagine it better to repair a broken church and tower, but our confession must be that if God blesses us subsequently in will be as much in spite of the tower as because

of it. We might imagine it better to sell up and travel “light” in terms of property, but the same caveat will apply. In our personal lives, achieving the dream job, finally reaching retirement, having the family, emptying the nest – *whatever*: these are never the self-justifying ends we imagine them to be. As much *despite* what we think we have achieved, God will bless us, or others through us.

While we have noted a number of times lately that there are no true beginnings in history, it is also the case that there are no endings. There is no end with God but God himself – God as faithful, as keeping to the covenantal promise to remain with his people, despite where they might wander. This “end” is not a completion. The end, the thing we meet at our various conclusions, is the faithfulness of God. This meeting is always a new beginning which casts new light on who we are and what we have done. A judgement is made as God makes good of what we have done: God’s promises to David are the making good of the request for a king; Saul’s departure was the judgement on that request. When the word of judgement was spoken – the death of Saul – the shape of salvation from the judgement is already at hand – the promises to David.

These promises found a kind of fulfilment 1000 years later in the person of Jesus, but the dynamic of judgement and salvation remained the same. The judgement on the crucifixion of Jesus is the resurrection, the vindication of Jesus. Yet Jesus is raised not to condemn but to invite to understanding and healing: look, see, understand, believe, repent, follow. To eat and drink in Holy Communion is to receive human failure as a source of healing, in the hands of this God.

The days of our lives are no mere passing story – sand upon sand, risings and fallings, cycles of history. Saul and David are not just characters in stories which happen to be found in our holy book. Here, as if through a glass darkly, we see God dealing with us all in judgement and grace, the grace meeting the judgement head on, and overcoming it.

May this grace – known in its perfection in Jesus the Son – meet us, and overcome us, and set us free. In that may we know the peace which passes all understanding, our hearts and minds kept in the knowledge of God’s love for his fallen creatures and of his refusal to do anything but work for their salvation. Amen.
