

Sunday 13  
28/6/2015

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 17:57-19:9  
Psalm 9  
Mark 5:21-43

### Your kingdom come

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There is a trick to the reading of Scriptures which involves, well, actually *reading* the Scriptures, *closely*. By this I mean that what is going on in the stories is not always as straightforward as it might at first seem.

Our reading from 1 Samuel this morning follows on from the account of David's victory over the Philistine giant "Goliath". Most of us have probably heard sermons which conclude from the tale what David himself seems to conclude, which is that if God is with us, nothing finally can stand against us. This must be true. But what if it is the case that God is against us? If God is against us in the same kind of way that we believe God was *for* David, then we have no hope. This is obvious enough for Goliath, about whom most of us don't give a second thought.

But there is another player in the story, against whom God also stands, who is a much more nuanced presence, and so who might play on our sympathies rather more profoundly than Goliath: King Saul. We can dismiss Goliath because he stands for all that is bad. We don't have much sympathy for him or real interest in him because he is *defined* as the problem, and so he is rather a one-dimensional character. But Saul is much more complex or, more to the point: Saul is much more like *us*.

In the unfolding of the story, we now know that Saul has been rejected as king. Saul knows this himself although he doesn't really seem to know what to make of it, and who would? Does the rejection mean that he should simply stop being king, and go back to farming? That's hardly going to work for anyone, God included, for David is not ready to be king either.

But the text's account of the shape of God's rejection of Saul is in fact rather more terrifying than the expectation that Saul might simply step down. We heard that "an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul", whereupon Saul attacked David twice with his spear. It is the second time we have heard that Saul has received an evil spirit *from God*, the first time being even more strongly stated (see the end of the anointing of David narrative – 1 Samuel 16.13f – in which the spirit of YHWH comes "mightily" on David, leaves Saul, and an evil spirit from YHWH torments Saul.). I suspect that the sending of the evil spirit raises a serious moral problem for many of us. How is it "fair", we might wonder, that Saul is actively influenced in this way? Do we not pray, Deliver us from evil, or similar, expecting that God will actually do this? What could one possibly do against a God who afflicts someone in this way? In what sense could this be the act of a "loving" God?

In fact, our moral objections here are likely to be somewhat confused and unclear even to ourselves. If God is *for* some things and those who do them, surely God is also *against* others. And, if God might act on behalf of those things God is "for", might not God also act against those things God is against? But if we look to what happens in the story, it is more complex than this simple justification implies. Saul is as much the cause of his own downfall as anything God does.

We hear that Saul fears David because Saul perceives that God is on David's side. This is rather strange. If God is on David's side, and I want to be on God's side, ought I not simply position myself next to David? Why not side with David rather than oppose him? This, of course, Saul does not do because, despite having heard from Samuel that he has been rejected as king he cannot, and does not, simply stop being king. And, in continuing in the role of king, he necessarily defends his kingship against perceived threats. It is seemingly a self-contradictory condition, but Saul can't extract himself from it.

He does, then, the kinds of things which anyone might do in his situation. Perceiving him to be a threat, Saul removes David from the royal court, sending him out on military missions. David, however, is wildly successful, and this just further exacerbates the problem. Saul's son Jonathon has already declared himself devoted to David. Jonathon has given David his own sword and armour and so has, perhaps, declared David to be Saul's rightful successor. Further, Saul's daughter Michal falls in love with David. This becomes the basis for another plan by Saul to deal with David. The wedding dowry demanded is the foreskins of 100 Philistines. Saul expects David to die trying to deliver, but he delivers 200 instead, further cementing David's fame in contrast to Saul's decline in the people's imagination and David is now within the royal household as son-in-law. Saul grows more afraid of him and so, we hear, he becomes "David's enemy from that time forth".

If it is the case that Saul is tormented by an evil spirit from God, it is also the case that he makes perfectly rational and free decisions, each of which just makes the matter worse from his own perspective. He twists and turns against David – and so against God – each turn tightening the noose around Saul's own neck. Every effort to destroy David brings David more strength. All of Saul's political cunning works against him. He is, then, both destined to fail because God has abandoned him – as the story has it – and fails by his own hand; it is not possible to tease the two causes apart.

This is not exactly a heart-warming story but, whatever our emotional response, what does it have to do with us? Why might it be valuable to hear this story still today?

It is ostensibly on Saul's behalf that we object to the suggestion that God sent an evil spirit to torment him, or even that God rejected him. Yet, if we are honest, we protest not on behalf of a long-dead Saul but on our own behalf. What if *we* are more Saul than David? What if God has abandoned us, only that we had no Samuel to deliver the news. Or perhaps our Samuel did come, and we did not know how to handle the announcement, as Saul himself clearly did not, or perhaps simply didn't notice. Is this why things are as they are, why we are in this situation, why this or that has happened to us or to me or to you? What I mean by "this situation" could be anything: the condition of the mainstream church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or my failing health – anything for which we might be tempted to attribute some kind of divine judgement as the cause, anything in which an outcome might be thought somehow to be an "act of God".

How baffling is the thought that not simply I might be against God but that God might be against me; for God must be against some, and not only one-dimensional nasties like Goliath but perhaps sometimes even against his own anointed, Saul. It is baffling because we tend to imagine that *we* are – whether as church, or as a nation, or as individuals – in some way, God's anointed, enjoying the rights and privileges of God's elect. We live in the expectation of the favour of God, or the world more generally. We live as if we are right.

The point of all this is not to make accusations. It is rather that the story of Saul and David suggests that, in fact, I do not *know* whether, when, or how God is for or against me, or you, or us here and now. Saul could not really know this. David could not really know it. As we noted last week: no one *in* the story has read forward to the end. For us in the midst of our own stories – and who have not read forward to *their* conclusions – the crucial point is that it is *God* who is at work in Saul and David, and here. The kingdom which is beginning to take shape in these stories is not that of Saul or even of David, but God's own kingdom. As this unfolds the players are not mere pawns on a chessboard, directed here and there against their will, and neither are we. David and Saul are both free agents, both just doing what comes naturally under the circumstances. And yet, not *their* kingdoms come, not *their* will is done but, finally, God's.

Is this not what we pray for each week: "...your kingdom come, your will be done..."? Perhaps, mindful of what the unfolding of God's kingdom among us might look like, we might pray that prayer with a little more fear and trembling. It may well be that for God's kingdom to advance, we need to be removed. Yet this is the prayer we are called to pray. To pray for the coming of the kingdom of God is not to presume with Saul that we will reign with God against all pretenders to our position and privileges. It is a prayer which asks that we will be humbled, as were both Saul and David.

This is not, in fact, bad news. To be humbled in this way is to shift interest from the anxious enacting and telling of our own story to the awareness, or confidence, that there is another story to be told, another who acts in and through and, sometimes, against us. This actor plays so that, whatever we might do, he will be found to be faithful to the promise of blessing. For we cannot bless ourselves. Saul was rejected as king because he presumed to become a blessing to God, and so to himself. David, on the other hand, does nothing to bring about his ascent to the throne and, as we will see next week, even laments what it takes for God's promise to him to be fulfilled.

Through Saul's waverings in and out of madness and David's struggle simply to stay alive we see the slow process of the revelation of God's own reign. There is no predicting of outcomes, no reading of signs from the events around us. No cleverly devised strategy or business case will guarantee us a future. We will not finally be sure whether God has worked with us or against us. We can know only that God always works through us, *his* kingdom to bring. We can only know that, in the end – sometimes because of us, sometimes in spite of us – God will triumph.

Even as we must calculate, risk, act or not, succeed or fail, our faith is that with this God the poverty of human morals and politics will be overcome – life out of death.

And, thanks be to God, we will wonder that it could have happened.

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