

Pentecost 3
13/6/2021

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13
Psalm 20
Mark 4:26-34

Looking on the heart

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

Some of the best told stories in the Scriptures are about David, the shepherd boy who became king and ancestor of Jesus. There are the heroic stories like David and Goliath, David and Johanthan, David the musician and some shameful ones like David and Bathsheba. The whole anthology of David stories begins with one of the most skilfully crafted bits of literature. It is all about David, and yet David just gets a walk on part at the end. It is all about David, but the centre stage is occupied by Samuel. It is even book ended by reference to Samuel's itinerary. It starts, 'Then Samuel went to Ramah' (1 Samuel 15:34) and finishes, 'Samuel then set out and went to Ramah' (1 Samuel 16:13).

The political intrigue is wonderful. Samuel is instructed by the LORD to go to Bethlehem to anoint a king. Everyone is scared stiff. Samuel is scared of King Saul. The elders of Bethlehem are scared of Samuel. We would appreciate better why Samuel is so scary if we had read the story that immediately precedes this one. It concludes, 'And Samuel hewed Agag (king of the Amalekites) in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal.' (1 Samuel 15:33). It's OK, don't be scared, says the LORD, just take a heifer with you and pretend to be doing something religious. Who could suspect any political intrigue if you are worshipping? I mean, look at us. Is what we are doing here political? Well, actually it is. Not party political, but we are declaring loyalty beyond our different national and ethnic loyalties.

Anyway, back to the story where everyone seems to have been fooled by the heifer and the invitation to Jesse's household to join in offering a sacrifice. Behind the smoke and cinders of the sacrifice the real drama takes place.

David's anointing as king comes after a long line of misdirection. It is obvious that Samuel should consider Jesse's eldest to be king, and failing him, the next, then the next, and so on. The LORD has even given Samuel a clue as to what he should be looking for, or rather, what he should not be looking for - "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7)

Interestingly, the storyteller reveals this human propensity to looking on the outside when the story focuses on the shepherd boy's ruddy complexion and beautiful eyes. Michaelangelo also took a very human view when he released his statue of David from a lump of marble in Florence. Mind you, the story of Michaelangelo's statue has some resonance with the anointing story because the lump of marble was a reject.

Sorry about all these side steps and diversions. Life is full of side steps, misdirections and diversions that lead away from what is really important, away from what is life giving.

Samuel is to anoint a king chosen by the LORD. He must rely on the voice of the LORD to point in the right direction. He is to discern according to how God sees, not as humans see. The outward appearance will not do. God sees the heart or the core – that is what will reveal what a king should be.

God looked in the unexpected place for a king and found the shepherd from a family of one of the lesser tribes of Israel, a ruddy lad with beautiful eyes who had not been invited to the sacrifice.

Jesus looked in the unexpected places for the kingdom of God. He did not find metaphors for the Kingdom in palaces or temples, in mighty armies or libraries stacked with wisdom. He looked rather at a farmer scattering seed and waiting for the harvest. He looked at the tiniest of seeds and saw the tree and the birds that would nest in its branches.

All very interesting, but what are we to do? The story of David's anointing reminds us of our humanity and how different our perspective on what is important from how God looks to the core. Well, as followers of Jesus there is the invitation to see differently – to attend to what Jesus made of the world and what is important. To look for signs of the Kingdom coming. Sure, we will continue to be fed misinformation and distractions, so the challenge will always be to look for God's view and listen for God's word. We are bombarded by news and commentary on all manner of local, national and world affairs. There is plenty of advice on how to deal with them, or, indeed, whether to deal with them. Anyone grappling with how to see what God sees has little difficulty with some of our disputed issues – should we be doing something about carbon emissions? Should we be dealing compassionately with a family incarcerated on Christmas Island? Even here we find professing Christians in leadership failing to come up with the same answers you and I see so plainly.

Paragraph 3 of *The Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church tells of our journey to God's promised goal and concludes with this sentence: 'On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.'

Our seeing and hearing and acting in God-like ways is possible by gifts that keep us on the way. The prophet Samuel went to Bethlehem to share in a religious ritual and performed an act, guided by the word of the LORD that impacted a nation's future under the reign of God.

We gather for religious ritual, for worship, and impelled to act in ways that reveal something of God's kingdom coming. Little acts are fine – like a farmer spreading little seeds.
