

## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

## Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

readings: [1 King 2.10-12, 3.3-14, Ephesians 5.15-20, John 6.51-58](#)

18 August 2024

Over the last three months in our Bible readings for the Sunday Eucharist we have been hearing stories from the history books of the OT – specifically those surrounding the first three kings of Israel, Saul, David and now Solomon. The 3000-year-old events recorded are tricky terrain for 21st century listeners and preachers. However, there are many connections for contemporary life in this Game of Thrones. As I tell the story I invite you to make your own connections.

The United Kingdom of Hebrew peoples emerged from a confederation of tribes towards the turbulent end of the Bronze Age in Middle East and Mediterranean. So, the rise of Israel needs to be understood within its own time as clans becoming a nation within context of rise and fall of surrounding super-powers. And Israel had a unique story. In antiquity nations had their pantheons of gods - often warlike, self-obsessed and indifferent or even hostile to human beings. Contrast this with 'God saw everything that he made, and indeed, it was very good.' One God, Yahweh, the eternal 'I am', who creates 'goodness.' In Genesis 1 'good' appears seven times. Original blessing. And whilst other nations did indeed have key stories (flood) and impressive law codes which overlap with Israel no other people had a vision of the One God, delighting in creation and in relationship with a people who were to be a blessing to all nations. This was totally different. The Old Testament is primarily a work of theology describing God's involvement with this people.

Before Saul, David and Solomon appear the prophet Samuel issues a warning. The very idea of kingship is sub-optimal. Why? Because for this people God is to be your sole king. The very idea of kingship is a rejection of Yahweh and if you go down this track be aware that the king will commandeer your sons and daughters to serve his needs; take your land, livestock and personnel to make him and his generals wealthy. You will be reduced to serfdom and you will 'cry out because of your king.' You make your choice. And so they do – a king it is.

So, Saul is crowned. He is physically impressive but today we would say that he suffers from a mental illness. He also has a deep envy of David's military prowess. He obsesses about David and spends years trying to catch and kill him. He is stripped of the monarchy and dies in disgrace.

David's reign starts well in terms of uniting the kingdom but when he retires from the military arena and starts wandering palace corridors and rooftops indulging his baser instincts a darker picture emerges as he manipulates other people's lives for his own self-gratification. His sons take their lead from him inflicting lasting damage upon the family and nation. Their fight for the succession draws many innocent people into the collateral damage. At the end David seems an elderly, sad, dejected figure for whom grief is never far away and consequences of his decisions haunt him – 'my sin is ever before me'. Ps 51.

Solomon emerges from this mess as the new king. He has only known wealth and privilege. At times there is almost a bored wistfulness about him as he reflects on the meaning of life. His prayer for wisdom comes after he has ruthlessly swept aside all competitors. He spends vast amounts of time and money on luxury palaces, interestingly completing them before the Temple. By alliances with foreign powers he gives space for their gods, thus, potentially, undermining Israel's unique covenantal relationship with Yahweh. The

Book of Kings is withering in its critique of him. After Solomon the United Kingdom disintegrates. It had lasted less than 80 years.

Here we have a leadership manual. If we learn from Saul that leaders need to be looked after and supported, and from Solomon that leadership is about task (it's not all about you) then David reminds us that the personal behaviour of leaders matters because it sets the culture of an organisation. At its worst leadership can create an insecure place where nobody feels safe and lives both within it and beyond are damaged. Such insecurity distorts organisational behaviours and you never get the best out of people in circumstances like that. David's story also raises a big question for leaders, namely who is telling you the truth about yourself. David had a member of his cabinet, Nathan the prophet, who was the truth teller par excellence. We are at a critical moment for leadership globally but every organisation needs wise, human healthy, leadership. Taking Solomon's prayer for the wisdom to discern between good and evil, thereby establishing justice and the common good, seems not only to model good intercession but the right priorities.

We also have a mirror on human contradiction. These kings all have their good side – Solomon's prayer in today's reading illustrates a desire to be a wise and just king whose reign benefits all his people. David's psalms are still used today and Saul had a 'heart for God'. But their reigns were overtaken by darker energies that led to bad choices that consumed them and destroyed others. Actions and behaviour have consequences. The story cries out for redemption. Like all our stories. We are caught between the sevenfold goodness of God and the pantheon of the self. We inhabit a place of ache, between our what is and God's what if. An embodied Lent pierced by Easter's gift.

And we have some theology. Marilynne Robinson in her book on Genesis asks in the light of some of the stories there, 'What kind of God would bear with us'? OT theology tries to answer that. Solomon's prayer shows an approachable and responsive God longing to bestow wisdom, justice and goodness. But we also see a God whose covenanted faithfulness issues in extreme patience and the God who works with the sub-optimal. This 'courteous God' as Julian of Norwich called him is like a powerful subterranean river of life every now and then bursting out in the goodness of humanity or the gift of the poet.

This is the God who found human expression in one from David's line. The One who was full of grace and truth, who taught 'Blessed are the peacemakers' and invited those for whom life weighed them down to 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.' This is a different kind of king, with a different kind of kingdom, a different kind of throne and a different kind of gift. For, 'the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

Thanks be to God.

**The Very Revd Jerry Lepine**