

May we embrace the challenge: It is only through looking beyond outward appearance – and wider than what is first paraded before us – that we discover the potential beauty of another’s heart.

May we be embraced by the reassurance: Despite what we may feel about our own outward appearance we can dare to believe in God’s love of us and his power to change our hearts and give us an inner beauty.

Prayer:

God, who looks not on outward appearance but on the heart, enable me to see beyond what others look like and to discern their true inner beauty and worth.

Save me from regarding as ugly what you see as beautiful and help me to look broader and wider and find you in the kindness of the unexpected.

Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me that your love might be known and grace seen as my heart-beat.

# Daily Devotions from the URC

## Saul, David & Solomon The Establishment & Disintegration of the Kingdom 1

24<sup>th</sup> September – 13<sup>th</sup> October 2018



### Introduction

After settlement in the Promised Land Israel saw itself as a theocracy. From time to time God would raise up a judge who would lead the people but, over time, the clamour for a king grew. The experience of monarchy was not, it must be said, a happy one. Saul was unstable, David - lauded as the godly king - was an adulterer and murderer and Solomon - seen as wise - enslaved people for his

building projects, expanded the kingdom beyond what it could cope with and, after his death, it split in two - the northern Kingdom of Israel with Judah in the South. The stories of these flawed kings have fascinated, and informed, God's people for thousands of years. The stories, from time to time, reflect ideas about God which we now find troubling and care should be taken when commenting on some of the stories.

Andy Braunston

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Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen any of these.' Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

### Reflection

Outward appearances make their impressions upon us – however hard we try to resist; we live in a culture dominated by the cult of outward appearance: where looking 'beautiful' or having the 'perfect' physique is a major concern and a source of lucrative business. (If you doubt that assertion, be honest: do you never look in the mirror and think, "I wish I didn't look like that" or at someone else and think, "I wish I looked more like them"?)

Today's passage is a strong rebuke to judging by outward appearance. The word addressed to Samuel as he undertook the task of identifying a king to succeed Saul remind us that the Lord looks on the heart not the body. Samuel had to consider what might be described as a talent show line-up: the seven sons of Jesse. Even then the successful candidate is not found until Samuel asks if all the sons were present. Jesse concedes that David, the youngest, is out keeping the sheep. (There is a rich irony in that David's outward appearance is described as "handsome"! ) God affirms this good-looker as his choice – a choice that would not have been made had Samuel not looked wider than what was at first paraded before him. (There is a further irony in that the heart of this David will, later, be discovered to be far from perfect as he sends Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to his death so that she can become his wife!)

It is not very difficult to condemn leaders who do wrong. Social media mean we do not need to go near them to do so. Perhaps a distinctively Christian element is to still see them, through it all, as human beings made in the image of God, always with potential for redemption; and even more in need of our prayers given their burdens of responsibility. It may then be harder to see the world simply as goodies and baddies, but we were warned that if we think we can separate the wheat and the tares we have misunderstood how God works.

Prayer

Almighty Father

When I see wrong today, give me the courage to condemn it.

And when I see the person who has done wrong, give me the love to see them as another human being, to long for their wellbeing with a heart like yours, to ask what I can do to restore them to the right path.

And if I do wrong today, please inspire someone to be merciful to me.

In Jesus' name Amen.

[Saturday 13th October David anointed as King](#)

*The Rev'd Geoffrey Clarke, Minister, The Crossing (Methodist & United Reformed) Church, Worksop and Wales Kiveton Methodist Church*

1 Samuel 16: 1 - 13

The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord.' But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the

[Monday 24th September The Demand for A King](#)

*The Rev'd Nick Jones is minister of Heswall URC & St. George's URC, Thornton Hough*

from 1 Samuel 8: 1 - 18

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel... Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice. Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.' But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.' So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'

Reflection

Back in June, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders was asked about US Attorney General Jeff Sessions' use of Romans chapter 13 to defend

the separation of children and parents on the US border, and said that 'it is very Biblical to enforce the law.' Do we believe this? How do we respond as Christians to political authority? Should we accept them as put there by God, or should we be ready to challenge them over matters of justice, even committing acts of civil disobedience?

Over the centuries, various monarchies have claimed that they have been given their power by God, sometimes citing the precedent of King David, and some monarchs have claimed absolute power as a result. This was one of the causes of the English Civil Wars in the 17th century, but it's not an idea completely consigned to history. If you've got a (British) coin to hand and look closely at it, you'll see the first part of the inscription reads 'Elizabeth II D.G. Reg.' This is short for the latin *Dei Gratia Regina* - Queen by the grace of God. This most everyday of objects contains a theological claim that our monarch was put there by God. So while the idea of the 'divine right of kings' has been watered down a little, it is still sometimes argued, usually by powerful people, that governing authorities must be backed by God.

However, the Biblical support for monarchy, or the automatic legitimacy of any ruler, isn't so straightforward. This passage certainly doesn't suggest having a king will be good for Israel. Rather, a king will exploit the people for his own benefit, and the Lord, through Samuel, suggests this isn't the right way forward. This suggests we should put justice ahead of support for any particular leader or institution.

#### Prayer

Gracious and almighty God,  
we pray for people in positions of power,  
and ask they will use that power  
with wisdom and humility  
for the benefit of all.

We ask also that where there is injustice  
you will give us the strength and courage  
to challenge it, and speak truth to power,  
putting your kingdom ahead of earthly kingdoms.  
Amen.

you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?' Saul said to Samuel, 'I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me, I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But from the spoil the people took sheep and cattle, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal.'

...Saul said to Samuel, 'I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray, pardon my sin, and return with me, so that I may worship the Lord.' Samuel said to Saul, 'I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.' As Samuel turned to go away, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day, and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you. Moreover, the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind.'

#### Reflection

So Saul has done some of what the Lord commanded but not all of it; and it is not his first offence. God gives Samuel full rein to speak unequivocally, condemning the anointed King and letting him know that God has rejected him. A United Reformed Church General Assembly would applaud the fearless speaking of truth to power. A world of goodies (including us) and baddies (including people not like us) is so tidy and easy to grasp.

Samuel does his job before the King but we get an insight into his private thoughts. He had a sleepless night because he was deeply troubled by God's anger. Samuel knew Saul well by this point. Perhaps he even liked him at some level. Perhaps he had some sympathy with Saul's view that he had done what the people he was supposed to lead and motivate wanted: when we like that sort of behaviour we call it democracy. Perhaps he saw in Saul one more imperfect human being like the rest of us, struggling to know what is right when life's crises pummel us.

## Prayer

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
forgive our foolish ways!  
Reclothe us in our rightful mind;  
in purer lives thy service find,  
in deeper reverence praise.

Breathe through the heats of our  
desire  
thy coolness and thy balm;  
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
speak through the earthquake, wind  
and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm!

*J. G Whitter (1807 – 92) R&S 492*

## Friday 12th October Saul rejected as King

*John Ellis, former Moderator of the General Assembly and Secretary of Chapel  
United Church in Kent*

from 1 Samuel 15

Samuel said to Saul, ‘The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, “I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”’

...Saul took King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed.

The word of the Lord came to Samuel: ‘I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.’ Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the Lord all night. Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul...Samuel said, ‘Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And the Lord sent you on a mission, and said, “Go, utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.” Why then did

## Tuesday 25th September God grants the request

*The Rev’d David Scott, Minister, Duke Street & Saughtonhall URCS Edinburgh*

1 Samuel 8: 19-22

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, ‘No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.’ When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. The Lord said to Samuel, ‘Listen to their voice and set a king over them.’ Samuel then said to the people of Israel, ‘Each of you return home.’

## Reflection

Israel is persistent in its call for change. Their system of haphazard leadership is creaking at the edges to say the least and people are unhappy. They have turned to Samuel as it is the appointment of his sons and their behaviour that seem to be the source of the disquiet. However, despite Samuel’s advice the people refuse to listen and are determined to be ruled like other nations with a monarchy. The people focus on the negatives of what they have and seek something different but do not really seem interested in the detail and the potential consequences.

It is interesting to recognise parallels in the behaviour of people in Old Testament narratives with that of the people’s behaviour today. It is always dangerous to base a decision by focusing on the negatives and disregarding the positives, especially when the details and consequences of the outcome are not properly listened to, considered and thought through.

For the people petitioning Samuel the attraction of a king is all positive with expectations of a more stable, equatable and reliable form of governance as well as clear leadership in battle. Yet up until this point the system they had seems to have served them well and they seem blinkered to risks such as personal gain and control by a few, which a monarchy would bring. Their driver is to be like others.

The people are persistent and determined and so as Samuel conveys this to God they are eventually granted their desire for a king. It is a huge change that will shape the Biblical narrative that follows.

Despite the lack of thought and despite the risks, God listened to the people, grants them their request and then works with it.

#### Prayer

Ever present God, when I think I know best, when I fail to listen and fail to see the bigger picture; show me patience. Show me understanding.

Work with my misjudgments and mistakes to ensure your will is done. Amen

[Wednesday 26th September Saul Chosen to be King](#)  
*The Rev'd David Jenkins, retired minister, Marple URC*

#### I Samuel 9: 1- 20

There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel ...a man of wealth. He had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else. Now the donkeys of Kish, Saul's father, had strayed. So Kish said to his son Saul, 'Take one of the boys with you; go and look for the donkeys.' He passed through the hill country of Ephraim and passed through the land of Shalishah, but they did not find them. And they passed through the land of Shaalim, but they were not there. Then he passed through the land of Benjamin, but they did not find them. When they came to the land of Zuph, Saul said to the boy who was with him, 'Let us turn back, or my father will stop worrying about the donkeys and worry about us.' But he said to him, 'There is a man of God in this town; he is a man held in honour. Whatever he says always comes true. Let us go there now; perhaps he will tell us about the journey on which we have set out.' Then Saul replied to the boy, 'But if we go, what can we bring the man? For the bread in our sacks is gone, and there is no present to bring to the man of God. What have we?' The boy answered Saul again, 'Here, I have with me a quarter-shekel of silver; I will give it to the man of God, to tell us our way.' (Formerly in Israel, anyone who went to inquire of God would say, 'Come, let us go to the seer'; for the one who is now called a prophet

Jonathan!' Then the people said to Saul, 'Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great victory in Israel? Perish the thought! As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground; for he has worked with God today.' So the people ransomed Jonathan, and he did not die. Then Saul withdrew from pursuing the Philistines; and the Philistines went to their own place.

#### Reflection

For Saul, not putting God as his first priority was a major error. Like many of today's leaders, he was more concerned about his own image rather than following God's guidance. We are told that he was of striking appearance which in the long term only served to enhance his vanity. Not only that, he was impulsive and perhaps opened his mouth before he had put his brain into gear. As a consequence, his whole approach to leading Israel was based on momentary instincts. For him, his priority was the defeat of the Philistines at all cost. As part of his ill thought plan, he orders his army to take an oath not to eat before the conflict with their enemy. In verse 27 we are told that Jonathan had not heard the order to take his father's oath, so did that make any difference?

The most common usage of oaths today relates to legal matters, usually in the form of "telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." By today's standards, had Johnathan been asked whether or not he had heard his father's order at the outset, then by answering in the negative he had no case to answer.

Oaths are promises of varying kinds, often made with good intention, although for some an oath has little or no real significance, it appears to be yet another hoop to jump through. Historically, in this country, a gentleman's word was his bond. But on occasions even this was open to question. Unlike Saul we need to ask ourselves "What would God want us to do in respect of the circumstances we find ourselves in? Do we listen for His call, or do we carry on doing our own thing?"

Now Saul committed a very rash act on that day. He had laid an oath on the troops, saying, 'Cursed be anyone who eats food before it is evening and I have been avenged on my enemies.' So none of the troops tasted food. All the troops came upon a honeycomb; and there was honey on the ground. When the troops came upon the honeycomb, the honey was dripping out; but they did not put their hands to their mouths, for they feared the oath. But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the troops with the oath; so he extended the staff that was in his hand, and dipped the tip of it in the honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes brightened. Then one of the soldiers said, 'Your father strictly charged the troops with an oath, saying, "Cursed be anyone who eats food this day." And so the troops are faint.' Then Jonathan said, 'My father has troubled the land; see how my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if today the troops had eaten freely of the spoil taken from their enemies; for now the slaughter among the Philistines has not been great.'

... Then Saul said, 'Let us go down after the Philistines by night and despoil them until the morning light; let us not leave one of them.' They said, 'Do whatever seems good to you.' But the priest said, 'Let us draw near to God here.' So Saul inquired of God, 'Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?' But he did not answer him that day. Saul said, 'Come here, all you leaders of the people; and let us find out how this sin has arisen today. For as the Lord lives who saves Israel, even if it is in my son Jonathan, he shall surely die!' But there was no one among all the people who answered him. He said to all Israel, 'You shall be on one side, and I and my son Jonathan will be on the other side.' The people said to Saul, 'Do what seems good to you.' Then Saul said, 'O Lord God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant today? If this guilt is in me or in my son Jonathan, O Lord God of Israel, give Urim; but if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim.' And Jonathan and Saul were indicated by the lot, but the people were cleared. Then Saul said, 'Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan.' And Jonathan was taken.

Then Saul said to Jonathan, 'Tell me what you have done.' Jonathan told him, 'I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand; here I am, I will die.' Saul said, 'God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die,

was formerly called a seer.) Saul said to the boy, 'Good; come, let us go.' So they went to the town where the man of God was. As they went up the hill to the town, they met some girls coming out to draw water, and said to them, 'Is the seer here?' They answered, 'Yes, there he is just ahead of you. Hurry; he has come just now to the town, because the people have a sacrifice today at the shrine. As soon as you enter the town, you will find him, before he goes up to the shrine to eat. For the people will not eat until he comes, since he must bless the sacrifice; afterwards those eat who are invited. Now go up, for you will meet him immediately.' So they went up to the town. As they were entering the town, they saw Samuel coming out towards them on his way up to the shrine. Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed to Samuel: 'Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the suffering of my people, because their outcry has come to me.' When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord told him, 'Here is the man of whom I spoke to you. He it is who shall rule over my people.' Then Saul approached Samuel inside the gate, and said, 'Tell me, please, where is the house of the seer?' Samuel answered Saul, 'I am the seer; go up before me to the shrine, for today you shall eat with me, and in the morning I will let you go and will tell you all that is on your mind. As for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, give no further thought to them, for they have been found. And on whom is all Israel's desire fixed, if not on you and on all your ancestral house?' Saul answered, 'I am only a Benjamite, from the least of the tribes of Israel, and my family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin. Why then have you spoken to me in this way?'

#### Reflection

This must be one of the most attractive Hebrew stories. It's got everything. The reader is kept on the edge of their seat. It starts off with a wild goose (donkey) chase, as Kish's Hollywood-Handsome son travels miles and miles looking in vain. Then the real star of the story comes into its own. This is not Saul, or Samuel, but the unnamed boy who was accompanying Saul on the donkey-hunt. The laddie not only stops Saul from feebly returning home, but sets up a meeting with the "seer" Samuel, who as a small boy years before had himself been called to service as "nobb but a lad." Anyway, back to the drama... the unnamed boy not only persuades Saul to meet Samuel but provides the

required monetary offering. What a star! (Are you reminded of the boy with the picnic loaves and fishes?) So the climax of the story: Saul is introduced to the king-maker, Samuel, who, still receiving quite specific divine messages, is told that Israel's search for a king is now over. Even though Saul is from the tribe of Benjamin - the smallest and least powerful tribe - he is the chosen one. Oh - and by the way, even the donkeys are found.

So this searching God of ours is at it again. The Jesus-man would remind us many times of the Searching One. And no one is out of range. No one is too inconspicuous. The Searching-God raises the humble and moves history on.

#### Prayer

Searching God,  
You search for a world filled with hope and purpose,  
and you never tire of calling people to join you in the quest.  
Stop us in our tracks,  
turn us around,  
lead us to a new place.  
Challenge us to use the gifts we have  
to create communities of shalom  
in the way of Samuel who listened, and Jesus who lived it all. Amen.

[Thursday 27th September St Vincent de Paul](#)

*Dr Lesley Bailey, Lay Preacher St George's URC, Maghull, Liverpool*

#### Information

Born in 1581 at Ranquine in Gascony, Vincent was educated by the Franciscans and was ordained at the age of nineteen. He was something of a token priest until his conversion in 1609, when he resolved to devote himself and all he owned to works of charity. He founded communities for men and, with Louise de Marillac, helped to begin the Sisters of Charity, the first community of women not to be enclosed and which was devoted to caring for the poor and sick. Vincent worked for the relief of galley slaves, victims of war, convicts and many other groups of needy people. He became a legend in his own lifetime and died on this day in the year 1660.

teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

#### Reflection

Today's Gospel reading is sometimes entitled "The Great Commission". Jesus invites his disciples to meet him so that they can be commissioned in turn. The only appropriate reaction to this is worship.

Paulinus was commissioned as the first Archbishop of York and to bring the Christian faith to the margins. Edwin listened to the preaching of Paulinus before he became a Christian. He also consulted his advisors. One said, "If the new religion can lighten that darkness for us, then let us follow it."

Paulinus is said to have baptized thousands of people near Catterick and Rothbury and also near the royal summer residence of Yeavinger (near Wooler). The Church in Northumbria flourished under Paulinus' leadership. When Paulinus had to go back south he left Deacon James in charge of the Northumbrian Church.

The figure of Deacon James is at the centre of the beautiful stained glass window outside in the peace garden beside Flodden Peace Centre at Crookham United Reformed Church. Its inspiring and challenging message of "Bringing peace to these hills" reverberates through the ages from Paulinus to 21st Century disciples of Jesus trying to live out "The Great Commission" today.

#### Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, we thank you for your servant Paulinus, whom you called to preach the Gospel to the people of northern England. Raise up in this and every land evangelists and heralds of your kingdom, that your Church may proclaim the unsearchable riches of our Saviour Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

[Thursday 11th October Consequences of a Foolish Oath](#)

*The Rev'd Colin Hunt, retired minister worshipping at Hutton & Shenfield Union Church, Essex*



one in favour of my abuser's identity. It is risky taking the mega story over the micro one. So much is to be questioned. Praise God. Each of us is called to deep faith in mystery, with a tenacious hold on the perpetual reality of grace.

#### Prayer

Oh God, forgive us when we use you to reinforce our selves.  
We thank you for our own gifted complexity, yet we confess we often want simplicity in others.  
You are loving justice in mysterious ways, yet we often want certainties.  
Remind us that you gift us with power to love beyond our imagining; to be neither victor nor vanquished.  
Give us grace to trust you, so we can trust ourselves to be loving.  
Amen.

*Wednesday 10th October Paulinus, First Bishop of York, Evangelist  
The Rev'd Mary Taylor, minister, Crookham URC*

#### Information

Born in the latter part of the sixth century, probably in Italy, Paulinus was among the second group of monks sent by Pope Gregory to England to assist Augustine in his work. He went with the party that accompanied Ethelburga to Northumbria, where she was to marry the king, Edwin, who subsequently took his wife's Christian faith as his own. Paulinus built the first church in York in about the year 627 and was its first bishop. He travelled much north and south of the Humber, building churches and baptising new Christians. He had to flee for his life, however, when Edwin was killed in battle by the pagan king, Penda of Mercia, and Paulinus became Bishop of Rochester. He died on this day in the year 644.

Reading: St Matthew 28: 16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and

Reading Isaiah 58: 5 - 11

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail.

#### Reflection

There's a saying about being so heavenly minded that you're no earthly use - but that isn't a charge that can be levelled at St Vincent de Paul. Like so many of us, he rather paid lip service to his faith - until God got hold of him (and that was after his ordination - which, in his time, was a career move for younger sons, rather than a calling in and of itself) and God set him to work. So much so, that his name remains known today as a charitable institution, still doing good work, at least here in the north west of England. In our passage today, set after the return from the Exile, things were not going so well for the folk who had returned - the people who had been left behind when they were taken to Babylon did not welcome them back with open arms! They had had a tough time while they had been away, and now they had a new bunch of "lords and masters" who were not treating them too well....Meanwhile, the "returnees" got even more "religious" - because things were not working out in the way they had anticipated. This passage represents God's response to an increasingly divided society - who were, at the end of the day, one people: God's people.

Is any of this beginning to sound just a tiny bit familiar? It should do - because God is still calling His people out from behind their stained glass windows into

the world to care for the people He loves, to create a society where none are homeless, none go hungry, and none go naked: A society where all are treated with the dignity that humanity bestows upon them, and hurts are healed.

### Prayer

Thank you for calling St Vincent de Paul, despite his failings  
For we know that you could use us.  
Give grace that we never hide behind our rituals, our doors  
So fail to see what lies before us:  
Grant kindness - compassion for all who suffer,  
A willingness to set aside our agenda, our precious programmes  
And put Yours first.  
For You taught that we must love our neighbour as ourselves.  
Lord make it so. Amen

Friday 28th September Samuel anoints Saul King  
*Ed Strachan, Lay Preacher, Heald Green URC*

1 Samuel 10: 1 - 8

Samuel took a phial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, 'The Lord has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the Lord and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around. Now this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you ruler over his heritage: When you depart from me today you will meet two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah; they will say to you, "The donkeys that you went to seek are found, and now your father has stopped worrying about them and is worrying about you, saying: What shall I do about my son?" Then you shall go on from there further and come to the oak of Tabor; three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there, one carrying three kids, another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine. They will greet you and give you two loaves of bread, which you shall accept from them. After that you shall come to Gibeath-elohim, at the place where the Philistine garrison is; there, as you come to the town, you will meet a band of prophets coming down from the shrine with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre playing in front of them; they will be in a prophetic frenzy. Then the

Saul's lookouts in Gibeah of Benjamin were watching as the multitude was surging back and forth. Then Saul said to the troops that were with him, 'Call the roll and see who has gone from us.' When they had called the roll, Jonathan and his armour-bearer were not there. Saul said to Ahijah, 'Bring the ark of God here.' For at that time the ark of God went with the Israelites. While Saul was talking to the priest, the tumult in the camp of the Philistines increased more and more; and Saul said to the priest, 'Withdraw your hand.' Then Saul and all the people who were with him rallied and went into the battle; and every sword was against the other, so that there was very great confusion. Now the Hebrews who previously had been with the Philistines and had gone up with them into the camp turned and joined the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan. Likewise, when all the Israelites who had gone into hiding in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were fleeing, they too followed closely after them in the battle. So the Lord gave Israel the victory that day. The battle passed beyond Beth-aven, and the troops with Saul numbered altogether about ten thousand men. The battle spread out over the hill country of Ephraim.

### Reflection

Here we are. Another battle to note who is who, what they carry, who they kill and why. There are Kings in the midst. For me to get to grips with this, I need to zoom out from the micro story to the mega story. I have to zoom out to see more in these books of Samuel – to our Jewish faith relatives, just one book. I need to zoom out to note that it wasn't Samuel who wrote it all down, zoom out to see that this is not truly history, but a smidgen of history mixed with a great deal of theologising, literary license, and psychologising. The key is "The Lord gave Israel the victory that day." This is yet another of a multitude of narratives reinforcing the identity of Israel as God's chosen people. It's a strong identity, marrow, soul, and centuries deep. It is such a strong identity that it can make us zoom in so close to detail that we miss the zoomed-out view. Out in a distance wide enough to see God in all of God's graciousness, do we want to hold the idea that God does violence against one to bolster the identity of another? Can we see God choosing to make victors and vanquished? Zoomed in to the horrors which can come in each day, this is a comfortable idea. God will protect me from anyone who could do me damage, and so my identity as God's child is secure. Yet, I would find it hard indeed to see God as the one who inspired those who have done me actual violence, making me the vanquished

As I read this today's text I am reminded of two classic lines from the TV series 'The A Team - today, still wanted by the government, they survive as soldiers of fortune. If you have a problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can hire The A-Team.'

We encounter Jonathan with a plan that he has not shared: 'The people who were with him were about 600 men'. Here was a bold and daring young man who drew up a plan of action. Jonathan feared failure. To commit and lead the whole army to battle before he had proved the faithfulness of the Lord was a risk he wasn't prepared to take.

Jonathan with his armour-bearer heads off towards the Philistine garrison with a rocky crag on both sides 'Bozez' (Slippery One) and Seneh (thorny one). The reading ends 'The garrison and even the raiders trembled, the earth quaked and it became a very great panic' (and that reminds me of Corporal Jones' 'Don't panic' when things began to go wrong). We need the confidence of Jonathan who was prepared to drag himself up on his hands and feet. We need the reliability of those around us as we witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. 'Do all that is in your heart'.

The leader of the A Team would say: 'I love it when a plan comes together' - but let our actions be about transformation and not destruction.

Will YOU make it into The A Team for Christ's sake?

Prayer:

Gracious God, we pray for those who have been inspired, like Jonathan, to go off and prepare the ground for the changes and challenges that you require of us. On our journey through those slippery and thorny places, may we be assured of your strengthening presence, so that your plans may come together through us. Amen

[Tuesday 9th October Victory but another battle brews](#)

*The Rev'd Elizabeth Gray-King, Education & Learning Programme Officer, member St Columba's URC, Oxford*

1 Samuel 14: 16-23

spirit of the Lord will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person. Now when these signs meet you, do whatever you see fit to do, for God is with you. And you shall go down to Gilgal ahead of me; then I will come down to you to present burnt-offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being. For seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do.'

Reflection

You have to feel for Saul - he'd only set out to find and recover some of his father's donkeys, that had got lost, and here he is, being anointed king by Samuel, the last of the judges of that little nation. Their wish for an earthly king had been at the expense of their sense of the kingship of God, and here is Saul, being the first anointed wearer of those unenviable shoes.

And he's got a lot mapped out for him. Samuel, rightly and justly revered, man of God, is mapping out his future. Saul is going to meet a couple of men by the tomb of Rachel, a noteworthy landmark in itself, who are going to reassure him that the donkeys have been found. The original object of his mission has been dealt with, but there's more now. He's going to meet other people as well, culminating with a group of prophets whom he's going to join in prophesying and become something, someone, different. Later, he's going to be joined by Samuel at Gilgal, where sacrifices are to be made, according to the ritual and practice of the Jewish Law.

Now I'm challenged by this, even though I know that the story of Saul doesn't end well. I'm the sort of chap who likes his life pre-planned well ahead, in a risk-averse, predictable way - a bit dull, really, I suppose. Maybe some of you reading this are of similar temper and disposition. We are certainly called out of our comfort zones if we wish to be true servants of the Kingdom - can we really say that we use all of the gifts that God has given us, in the way that He would wish them to be used?

Prayer:

O Lord, give us the mindset that sees threats as opportunities and that welcomes challenge and change.

Give us the vision that sees the way ahead, and the insight that avoids the diversion.

Give us the wisdom that recognises the value in tradition retaining the wheat but discarding the chaff.

Show us the road and give us the courage to take it.

And start with me.

Saturday 29th September Ecstasy

*The Rev'd Ruth Whitehead, Moderator of the South Western Synod and a member at Taunton URC*

1 Samuel 10: 9-16

As Saul turned away to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart; and all these signs were fulfilled that day. When they were going from there to Gibeah, a band of prophets met him; and the spirit of God possessed him, and he fell into a prophetic frenzy along with them. When all who knew him before saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, 'What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?' A man of the place answered, 'And who is their father?' Therefore it became a proverb, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?' When his prophetic frenzy had ended, he went home. Saul's uncle said to him and to the boy, 'Where did you go?' And he replied, 'To seek the donkeys; and when we saw they were not to be found, we went to Samuel.' Saul's uncle said, 'Tell me what Samuel said to you.' Saul said to his uncle, 'He told us that the donkeys had been found.' But about the matter of the kingship, of which Samuel had spoken, he did not tell him anything.

Reflection

Like Henry the Eighth, it is hard to think of Saul as the beautiful young ruler, when our knowledge of him is so tainted by the murderous and twisted person he became. Yet here he is at the start of being chosen as God's king for the people. How wonderful and extraordinary Saul is at this stage of his life.

Samuel has told him he will be king; God 'given him a new heart' – presumably filled with the wisdom he will need to rule; and he has been possessed by the Spirit of God and has fallen into a prophetic frenzy with the other prophets.

One day Jonathan son of Saul said to the young man who carried his armour, 'Come, let us go over to the Philistine garrison on the other side.' But he did not tell his father... Now the people did not know that Jonathan had gone. In the pass, by which Jonathan tried to go over to the Philistine garrison, there was a rocky crag on one side and a rocky crag on the other; the name of one was Bozez, and the name of the other Seneh. One crag rose on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Geba.

Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armour, 'Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the Lord will act for us; for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few.' His armour-bearer said to him, 'Do all that your mind inclines to. I am with you; as your mind is, so is mine.' Then Jonathan said, 'Now we will cross over to those men and will show ourselves to them. If they say to us, "Wait until we come to you", then we will stand still in our place, and we will not go up to them. But if they say, "Come up to us", then we will go up; for the Lord has given them into our hand. That will be the sign for us.' So both of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines; and the Philistines said, 'Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves.' The men of the garrison hailed Jonathan and his armour-bearer, saying, 'Come up to us, and we will show you something.' Jonathan said to his armour-bearer, 'Come up after me; for the Lord has given them into the hand of Israel.' Then Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet, with his armour-bearer following after him. The Philistines fell before Jonathan, and his armour-bearer, coming after him, killed them. In that first slaughter Jonathan and his armour-bearer killed about twenty men within an area about half a furrow long in an acre of land. There was a panic in the camp, in the field, and among all the people; the garrison and even the raiders trembled; the earth quaked; and it became a very great panic.

Reflection

Jonathan was in no mood for just sitting around waiting to be attacked. Something in his heart sprung him into action: 'The people did not know that Jonathan had gone'. His trusted armour-bearer was with him: 'Do all that is in your heart. Do as you wish. Behold I am with you heart and soul'.

## Reflection

This Psalm has always been special to me as I remember reciting it during a Sunday School Anniversary as a little girl. Although I have forgotten most of it, I still recall the refrain, as I learnt it, 'May the peoples praise you O God, may all the peoples praise you'.

It is one of the shorter Psalms and yet it is full of wonderful words and great themes. It is a celebration of God's blessings to Israel and then a call to all nations to give thanks to God for the many gifts of creation. The words point to so much in Scripture, from the Aaronic Blessing to God's promise to Abraham that through him all nations would be blessed; as the blessing given to Israel is extended to all God's beloved people.

And that is where we come in – the blessing given to Israel includes us. Yet we live in a world of extremes in wealth and poverty – we may think ourselves developed, yet the gap between rich and poor is increasing. We may think ourselves intelligent, even wise, and yet we continue to perpetuate injustice, usually against the most vulnerable in society. Perhaps now more than ever we are riven by division, along political, class, ethnic, cultural and religious lines. We need to hear these words and actually take them in – God loves the world and intends justice and blessings for all God's people.

Oh, we can recite the words of this Psalm, it could even become our mantra, but it will mean nothing unless we actually act on what we say. If we do, then just maybe, more and more people may praise God.

## Prayer

May the peoples praise you O God, may all the peoples praise you.  
As we work towards a fairer sharing of the world's resources; may the peoples praise you O God, may all the peoples praise you.

[Monday 8th October Jonathan's Raid](#)

*The Rev'd Andrew Royal Minister Maidstone & Staplehurst URC*

from 1 Samuel 14: 1 - 15

But when he gets home to his uncle, the only 'news' he shares is of the donkeys he went looking for in the first place!

Perhaps it is good that none of these amazing acts of God turn the head of the king-to-be. All the signs point to him being the king the people have demanded of God, but he does not crow about being chosen and equipped in this way. He seems prepared to trust that his future will unfold in God's time and not allow any of the signs of God with him to drive him to pride. Perhaps it is this quality – of humility and service in God's call – that makes him the right choice as king, despite all that later befalls him.

As we strive to 'live the life of Jesus today' and are called to service in God's kingdom, we can learn from Saul. Others we respect may speak well of us, we may feel touched by God's wisdom and inspired by God's spirit, but in the end our response needs to be a humble 'yes' to God's call and not a shout of victory.

## Prayer:

God who is holy, strong and immortal,  
We thank you for calling us, who are none of those things.  
Give us hearts to know your wisdom,  
souls to dance to your spirit,  
and minds to remember we are servants of the world.  
As we follow the 'servant king' Jesus  
Amen.

[Sunday 30th September PSALM 66](#)

*The Rev'd Jo Clare-Young is minister of the North Yorkshire Coast Pastorate of the URC.*

Shout loud with joy to God;  
all earth, your chorus raise!  
Sing loud the honour of his name  
and glorious make his praise!

Speak thus to God the Lord:  
"How great your works of power!  
So overwhelming is your might

that foes before you cower.

"All earth bows down to you;  
they sing aloud your fame.  
They never cease to celebrate  
the glory of your name."

Come, see what God has done,  
his mighty works of old,  
His deeds towards the human race—  
how awesome to behold!

To let his people pass  
on foot through waters broad  
He turned the sea into dry land.  
Let us rejoice in God!

With might and power he rules;  
on nations sets his eyes.  
So let not rebels in their pride  
against him turn and rise.

O peoples, praise our God;  
his praise in song repeat.  
He has preserved our soul alive,  
from slipping kept our feet.

You tested us, O God,  
as silver is refined.  
You laid sore burdens on our backs;  
in chains we were confined.

You let us be oppressed;  
we went through flood and fire.  
But yet you brought us to a place  
which met our hearts' desire.

#### Reflection

'Well... you make me wanna shout...'

I can't read the opening line of this Psalm without hearing Lulu singing 'you make me wanna shout'. The Psalmist is excited and wants the whole of creation

With whole burnt offerings  
your temple courts I'll tread;  
I will fulfil my vows to you—  
the promises I made.

I'll keep the vows I made  
when trouble came my way;  
Rams, bulls and goats I'll sacrifice  
and on your altar lay.

Come, all who fear our God;  
I'll tell what he has done.  
I cried out to him with my mouth;  
his praise was on my tongue.

If I had cherished sin,  
the Lord would not have heard;  
But surely when I prayed to him  
God listened to my word.

For ever God be praised,  
who hears me from above;  
He has not turned away my prayer  
or kept from me his love.

say I blame Saul – I'd be worried about that too. In this day and age, we're always being told to take advantage of any 'window of opportunity' and I suspect that, in these circumstances, I would have acted in exactly the way Samuel did. I'd have taken decisions that weren't mine to take and tried to make a good go of it.

However, I'd have been wrong. Like Saul. Because sometimes, the waiting isn't a test from God to see how committed we are to action (of any kind). Sometimes waiting is part of the journey we're on towards God Himself. After all, Jesus waited thirty years before embarking on His great mission. What's a few days' waiting, or a few months' waiting? Years even? God is eternal and sometimes we need to be willing to let Him have His way with us, simply by doing nothing.

Because when we give God the gift of our time, when we choose to stop the frantic activity (and make-believe activity) which constitutes so much of our lives these days, then the blessings God will pour out on us will be beyond our wildest imaginings. They will even be eternal.

#### Prayer

Dear Lord, thank You that You know all our times and places, and You have a wonderful plan for our whole lives. Help us to turn to You in the times of waiting and in the times of activity, so that You may bless us and those around us in the way You yearn to do. Amen.

[Sunday 7th October Psalm 67](#)

*The Rev'd Branwen Rees; Role: East Wales Regional Minister*

1 God be merciful and bless us;  
shine upon us with your face,  
2 That the earth may know your  
actions  
and all lands your saving grace.

3 O God, may the peoples praise you;  
may all peoples sing your praise.  
4 For you judge the nations justly,  
ruling over every race.

May they sing with joy and gladness;  
may they all rejoice as one.  
5 O God, may the peoples praise you  
as they all unite in song.

6 Then the land will yield its harvest;  
God will pour his gifts abroad.  
7 God, our God, will surely bless us;  
all the earth will fear our God.

The Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude; they came up and encamped at Michmash, to the east of Beth-aven. When the Israelites saw that they were in distress (for the troops were hard pressed), the people hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns. Some Hebrews crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.

He waited for seven days, the time appointed by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people began to slip away from Saul. So Saul said, 'Bring the burnt-offering here to me, and the offerings of well-being.' And he offered the burnt-offering. As soon as he had finished offering the burnt-offering, Samuel arrived; and Saul went out to meet him and salute him. Samuel said, 'What have you done?' Saul replied, 'When I saw that the people were slipping away from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines were mustering at Michmash, I said, "Now the Philistines will come down upon me at Gilgal, and I have not entreated the favour of the Lord"; so I forced myself, and offered the burnt-offering.' Samuel said to Saul, 'You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which he commanded you. The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel for ever, but now your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you.' And Samuel left and went on his way from Gilgal. The rest of the people followed Saul to join the army; they went up from Gilgal towards Gibeah of Benjamin.

#### Reflection

I hate waiting. It's just so difficult. Whether the situation I'm facing is something good or something bad, I simply hate waiting. Especially if what I'm waiting for is a person as, quite frankly, I'm not good at team-work and I'd rather make my own decisions, for better or for worse.

Much like Saul then, in this passage. There he is, facing a difficult situation and the prophet he's relying on isn't there. Samuel has apparently let the king down, and Saul is frightened that he might be missing out if he goes on waiting. I can't

to shout in praise of God. I wonder, how often do we let ourselves get this excited about what God is doing in our lives? How often are we excited enough to shout? Bold enough to shout about the grace and love of God?

Why is the Psalmist so excited? The Psalm tells us that it is because God has answered prayer.

Sometimes perhaps we wonder, if we are honest, about answers to prayer. Sometimes it feels like there is no answer. Sometimes, in the deep of night, we wonder or doubt if something was an answer or just happenstance. We say that God answers prayers in peculiar ways. Other times we are certain, we see that God has answered prayer, but perhaps we are fearful to express that publically. Afraid to whisper it, let alone shout.

The Psalmist knows God has answered prayer. The Psalmist is certain, sure and is shouting in praise. This Psalmist encourages us to shout too.

'So, come on now, say you will now'... let's be certain, proud and loud. Let's shout about our faith and our God. Let's shout about those answers to prayer, little and large, minor and miraculous. Let's shout about how God is working in our lives, our communities, our towns. Let's shout about our God who does not ignore prayer. Let's shout about God's unfailing love.

Let's be brave and shout. 'Jump up and shout now, everybody shout now'. Along with everything on earth let's shout and tell the whole wide world about God.

Listening God, we give thanks that you listen to us, hearing our every word, feeling our hurt, sharing our joy.

Make us both listeners to others, and shouters of your message.  
Make us bold, loud and proud. Amen

Monday 1st October Saul proclaimed King

*The Rev'd Helen M Mee, Temporary Transition Minister, National Synod of Scotland.*

1 Samuel 10: 17 - 27

Samuel summoned the people to the Lord at Mizpah and said to them, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you." But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses; and you have said, "No! but set a king over us." Now therefore present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and by your clans.'

Then Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near, and the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot. He brought the tribe of Benjamin near by its families, and the family of the Matrites was taken by lot. Finally he brought the family of the Matrites near man by man, and Saul the son of Kish was taken by lot. But when they sought him, he could not be found. So they inquired again of the Lord, 'Did the man come here?' and the Lord said, 'See, he has hidden himself among the baggage.' Then they ran and brought him from there. When he took his stand among the people, he was head and shoulders taller than any of them. Samuel said to all the people, 'Do you see the one whom the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.' And all the people shouted, 'Long live the king!'

Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord. Then Samuel sent all the people back to their homes. Saul also went to his home at Gibeah, and with him went warriors whose hearts God had touched. But some worthless fellows said, 'How can this man save us?' They despised him and brought him no present. But he held his peace.

But yes, God was with them. He did not abandon them because they had messed up (and that is seriously Good News!), but called them to turn back to him again, and again.

I am much more like the disobedient, inconstant, faithless children of Israel than I like to admit. Have I today loved the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength? Have I loved my neighbour as myself? Nope.

God did not soft-pedal the Israelites' sin. Neither does he soft-pedal ours. He does not sweep it under the carpet and pretend it never happened. But neither does he reject us as no-hope failures. He knows that (to quote 'Frozen') "Everyone's a bit of a fixer-upper", and in his love and mercy, takes on the job of fixing us up.

Prayer

Merciful Lord,

I confess that I have turned aside from following you and followed useless things that cannot profit or save.

Grant me mercy and strength as I turn to you again.

Help me rightly fear you, serve you faithfully with all my heart, and consider what great things you have done for me. Amen

Saturday 6th October An Unlawful Sacrifice

*Anne Brooke, Attender, Elstead URC*

from 1 Samuel 13: 1 - 15

Saul chose three thousand out of Israel; two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and the hill country of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin; the rest of the people he sent home to their tents. Jonathan defeated the garrison of the Philistines that was at Geba; and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, 'Let the Hebrews hear!' When all Israel heard that Saul had defeated the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become odious to the Philistines, the people were called out to join Saul at Gilgal.



Friday 5th October Reassurance and Warning

Fay Rowland is a graduate student at Wesley House, Cambridge, and worships at St Botolph's Anglican Church, Northamptonshire.

1 Samuel 12: 19-25

All the people said to Samuel, 'Pray to the Lord your God for your servants, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves.' And Samuel said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart; and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. Only fear the Lord, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.'

Reflection

In these days of 'false news' it's quite refreshing to read some honest-to-goodness, up-front truth. The people had done wrong. They knew it. Samuel knew it. God knew it. Samuel did not soft-pedal their sin, saying "Oh, don't worry. It's alright." It wasn't alright. "You have done all this evil", he says.

Such bluntness is not fashionable today. In decades past, people flocked to the Hellfire and damnation preachers to hear the drunkard, the glutton, the gossip denounced, and their Hellish destination depicted – gnashing teeth and all. These days this type of preaching is much less fashionable.

Samuel was very clear; the people had sinned. There's no 'I told you so' here, no gloating over someone else's downfall. Samuel stands with the sinning community and plays his part in their restoration. For there is restoration.

Yes, they had sinned. Yes, the consequences would follow them through hundreds of years of bad kings, idolatry and eventual sweeping away to Exile.

Reflection

What might the results be if I asked each reader to close their eyes and imagine a King. Varied, I am sure!

Some might be thinking of a 21st century model of monarchy; some envisaging a picture book royal family – king and queen sitting side by side on grand thrones, raised above the court by a few steps, and each with a little gold crown on their heads; yet others might be considering Scriptural and liturgical models. Many may have other equally valid images.

The common ground is that every king will have been in some way called to and selected for the role. Monarchy is as much about being as doing, as much about personhood and relationship as role, rule and regulation.

Here we see the process Samuel used to establish this first human monarchy in Israel. Saul was relatively unknown and had no great experience or achievements behind him and yet he was the one chosen in a very thorough selection procedure.

This being a first monarchy there may have been many and varied expectations of the King but in a model of transparency and clarity which still stands up even to 21st Century scrutiny. The gradual narrowing of the field undertaken in such a way that everyone knew what was happening. The role descriptor and job description prepared, written and laid before the Lord again available to all or at least to all those who could read.

It excites me that here in Scripture and in a description of some of the earliest history of the Hebrew people we are seeing such a powerful three-way model of transparency, responsibility and accountability to the King, the people and to God. "The Word has yet more light and truth....."

Loving and forbearing God  
We celebrate your Majesty  
Forgive our obtuseness, our slowness to learn!

Help us to learn the basics of leadership

Stepping aside for others  
Clear remit and shared expectations  
Transparency  
Responsibility

Being accountable to each other and to you.  
Let the people say 'AMEN'

#### Tuesday 2nd October An External Threat

*The Rev'd Jenny Mills, Minister, Newport Pagnell URC & West End Wolverton URCS, Convenor of the URC Children's and Youth Work Committee.*

1 Samuel 10:27b - 11:7

Now Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had been grievously oppressing the Gadites and the Reubenites. He would gouge out the right eye of each of them and would not grant Israel a deliverer. No one was left of the Israelites across the Jordan whose right eye Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But there were seven thousand men who had escaped from the Ammonites and had entered Jabesh-gilead

About a month later, Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh-gilead; and all the men of Jabesh said to Nahash, 'Make a treaty with us, and we will serve you.' But Nahash the Ammonite said to them, 'On this condition I will make a treaty with you, namely that I gouge out everyone's right eye, and thus put disgrace upon all Israel.' The elders of Jabesh said to him, 'Give us seven days' respite that we may send messengers through all the territory of Israel. Then, if there is no one to save us, we will give ourselves up to you.' When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul, they reported the matter in the hearing of the people; and all the people wept aloud.

Now Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen; and Saul said, 'What is the matter with the people, that they are weeping?' So they told him the message from the inhabitants of Jabesh. And the spirit of God came upon Saul in power when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled. He took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by messengers, saying, 'Whoever does not come out after Saul and

but that was no good to them. Samuel spells out God's guidance and goodness towards them - how he'd protected them from their enemies and taken them through daunting challenges. But the Ammonites worried them - seriously. The Israelites wanted something, or someone, more "tangible" to follow, to meet the new challenge.

Samuel is very unhappy about pandering to this demand - he cannot believe that it will be a happy arrangement, with someone claiming and receiving the loyalty and obedience due to God. But God has told him to grant the wishes of the people, and give them a king.

After claiming his own credentials as a just and honest leader of the people, Samuel tells them that they, and their king are under God and are to do his will. That way they will prosper. And he rounds off his speech by calling on God, who sends thunder and rain.

We cannot all be leaders - most of us are destined to be followers, at least to some extent. But we are all called upon to be discriminating about whom we choose to follow. My own lifetime alone has seen the tragic results of leaders unworthy of the name and the trust bestowed upon them by their followers. Leaders who have led their followers to tragedy and destruction, hate and dissension. If our ultimate leader is God, we can be discriminating about those earthly leaders who seek our allegiance.

God spurns the quick fix. He challenges us to the hard path of obedience love, selflessness and inclusivity. The going is tough but the goal is so worth while.

Prayer

You call us to be disciples, to be followers.  
Deliver us from the temper that latches on to the deceptive promises and the quick fixes.  
Give us the resolve to spurn the easier byways on our journey,  
And the mindset to beckon others to join us.  
May your Holy Spirit grant us the courage for this,  
And the humility to give glory where it is most justly and appropriately due.

witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.’ And they said, ‘He is witness.’

Samuel said to the people, ‘The Lord is witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your ancestors up out of the land of Egypt. Now therefore take your stand, so that I may enter into judgement with you before the Lord, and I will declare to you all the saving deeds of the Lord that he performed for you and for your ancestors. When Jacob went into Egypt and the Egyptians oppressed them, then your ancestors cried to the Lord and the Lord sent Moses and Aaron, who brought forth your ancestors out of Egypt, and settled them in this place. But they forgot the Lord their God; and he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of King Jabin of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab; and they fought against them. Then they cried to the Lord, and said, “We have sinned, because we have forsaken the Lord, and have served the Baals and the Astartes; but now rescue us out of the hand of our enemies, and we will serve you.” And the Lord sent Jerubbaal and Barak, and Jephthah, and Samson, and rescued you out of the hand of your enemies on every side; and you lived in safety. But when you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, “No, but a king shall reign over us”, though the Lord your God was your king. See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the Lord has set a king over you. If you will fear the Lord and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king. Now therefore take your stand and see this great thing that the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon the Lord, that he may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves.’ So Samuel called upon the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel.

Reflection:

It's come to the crunch. The people wanted a king, and Samuel did not like that one little bit. The people had followed spiritually gifted and insightful people,

Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!’ Then the dread of the Lord fell upon the people, and they came out as one

Reflection

The beginning of this story was lost from the Hebrew text and restored from a Dead Sea scroll fragment of Samuel and explains the reason for the conflict in Chapter 11. Some of the Israelites from Gad and Reuben had fled and were living east of the Jordan in territory that the Ammonite king, Nahash considered his. As a sign of his power and a punishment from him, Nahash set about gouging out their right eyes. He also threatened to do the same to the elders of Jabesh, despite them agreeing to accept his power and control, because they harboured those who fled from him. They beg for a chance and send out messengers. Saul hears of this oppression and responds: he dismembers an oxen as a threat to those who choose not to join him in war. It was all powerful stuff and clear messages of domination and control.

There is nothing like blood and gore to persuade people to change their minds, to convince them that they need to change or to call people to action....it's always a winner....OK maybe not. We can struggle with such texts that contain elements we find repulsive and difficult to stomach and there is a tendency to dismiss them. But what we have here is of its time: it sets the scene for Saul to prove himself able to lead in battle and so therefore become king. Persuading people to change or to act using violence or threats is not conducive to good relations and faithful service; humiliation and fear are not inspirational tools. However, such oppression is still felt in places around the world. Freedom, peace, joy, love and mercy are just words, for some. May we appreciate that we do not find ourselves in such awful situations, whilst lamenting that humankind has still not learned from what has gone before; and then keep seeking ways to support those around the world who are suffering.

God of freedom, God of justice,  
God whose love is strong as death,  
God who saw the dark of prison,  
God who knew the price of faith:  
Touch our world of sad oppression  
With your Spirit's healing breath. AMEN. RS 625

Wednesday 3rd October Saul consolidates his hold on the throne  
*Chris Eddowes Lay preacher and elder, St George's URC, Hartlepool*

1 Samuel 11: 8-15

When Saul mustered them at Bezek, those from Israel were three hundred thousand, and those from Judah seventy thousand. They said to the messengers who had come, 'Thus shall you say to the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead: "Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you shall have deliverance."' When the messengers came and told the inhabitants of Jabesh, they rejoiced. So the inhabitants of Jabesh said, 'Tomorrow we will give ourselves up to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good to you.' The next day Saul put the people in three companies. At the morning watch they came into the camp and cut down the Ammonites until the heat of the day; and those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.

The people said to Samuel, 'Who is it that said, "Shall Saul reign over us?" Give them to us so that we may put them to death.' But Saul said, 'No one shall be put to death this day, for today the Lord has brought deliverance to Israel.'

Samuel said to the people, 'Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.' So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the Lord, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.

Reflection

Here we have what seems to be the beginning of a glorious new era for God's people. The people had wanted a king and the one chosen by Samuel was Saul - a tall, handsome brave young man who, when we first meet him, is searching for missing donkeys, not the most glorious of missions.

There are those who don't think much of him but by the end of the day he has proven himself worthy to be their king. Our view of Saul tends to be coloured by what we know of the end of his reign when he is bitter that David is the up and coming man. Here, however he is filled with, to use an old fashioned word, the zeal of the Lord. He organises his men into three companies and, by superior

leadership, he defeats the Ammonites, those who were not killed wisely running for their lives.

Now nobody denies his rights to be king and his supporters are all for killing those who had thought he was not the right man for the job. Saul refuses this; there has been enough killing. His reason for waging war was justified- the king of the Ammonites using atrocities against those he considered interlopers on his land- and now he is showing mercy. What a good choice for king! What can go wrong?

I often have problems with the Old Testament and its use of extreme violence. Some of the Psalms make me shudder. However, this was how the world was with its struggles between different tribes and nations for the same land and power. Unfortunately it still is. We cover it with a veneer of diplomacy but it remains the same.

The God revealed in Jesus has no time for this. If we follow the God of love, we must do all we can to make our world different and never glorify violence.

Dear Lord,

We start with such ideals and fail so easily.

Help us be your people of peace and show your love to all we meet.

Amen

Thursday 4th October Samuel's Farewell  
*Ed Strachan, Lay Preacher, Heald Green URC*

1 Samuel 12: 1 - 18

Samuel said to all Israel, 'I have listened to you in all that you have said to me, and have set a king over you. See, it is the king who leads you now; I am old and grey, but my sons are with you. I have led you from my youth until this day. Here I am; testify against me before the Lord and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you.' They said, 'You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from the hand of anyone.' He said to them, 'The Lord is witness against you, and his anointed is