

Bible 4 – Judges and Kings – 1 Samuel 8, Matthew 27

So this week Prince Harry performed his last engagement as a senior royal before heading off to his new life of anonymity (maybe). I don't know what you think about the whole saga, and I don't propose to give an opinion on it here – but what *has* interested me is the questions it raises about the nature of monarchy. In particular how, for all its privileges, to be part of a royal family is seen as a calling to servanthood and sacrifice.

Perhaps we've been spoilt by the example of our current Queen, and it may be that we'll never see her like again. When you see how other rulers lead around the world, we should be thankful every day for Queen Elizabeth. But the underlying critique of Harry's decision has largely been along the lines of: it doesn't matter that he didn't *choose* this life; the fact is, he's a prince and he should expect to live with the sacrifices required – him and his young family.

This whole debate goes to the heart of our theme today. Let's pick up the story so far. Last week we covered the theme of Passover, and we saw how it brought together some of the big ideas we'd already seen in the story of scripture. God's covenant with his people, His promise to be their loving God; the idea of a blood sacrifice that wins our freedom and forgiveness, the hope of a better future living in God's land under God's blessing, just as God had promised Abraham.

And that's how the story pans out, more or less – after the miracle of the Exodus there's a season of disobedience in the desert, but eventually Israel settles in the Promised Land under Joshua's wise and godly leadership and *finally, 500-odd years after God's original promise to Abraham, God's people are living in God's land under God's blessing.* (PAUSE)

But you just know it can't last. In fact, Joshua himself knows it won't last. There's a great scene at the end of the book of Joshua where the Israelites all commit to keep serving God and Joshua says 'oh no you can't' and the people say 'oh yes we can' and Joshua says 'oh no you can't' etc etc. Maybe it's just me, but that scene just needs a dame and a crowd of children shouting 'it's behind you' and it's virtually a pantomime.

But I digress. The point is, without Joshua – a righteous leader – at the helm, they go astray again pretty quickly. The Israelites' resolve lasted a generation, but then by chapter 2 of Judges the next generation are going their own way. The book of Judges is probably the most depressing of the whole bible. The curse of Genesis 3 returns in full measure – anarchy rules and what we see is this **cycle which repeats throughout the book**: mess up, get judged by God, then get a judge to sort them out, repent, it's all OK... then mess up again, get judged by God, then get a judge to sort them out, repent, it's all OK, then mess up again, and so on and so on...

If you look at most of the Judges, they're a pretty mixed bunch – some like Gideon are pretty good, albeit he didn't want to do the job, but others like Samson are just appalling. To quote an excellent summary of Samson I read this week: 'he shows no respect towards his family, the people he leads, the vow made at his birth, God's calling, any of the women he meets, or his friends. He demonstrates no compassion or interest in anyone else... The story of Samson, more than perhaps any other in Judges, is a warning about character and the dangers of power.' The choice of Samson by God might be summarised as: part grace, part warning.

Eventually God appoints the prophet Samuel as a kind of 'priest-ruler' and that works much better, at least during Samuel's golden years. Israel returns to some form of covenant relationship with God, crucially they get the Ark of the Covenant back from the Philistines – which is a clear sign of God's favour. But again it doesn't last – as we pick up the story in 1 Samuel 8, Samuel's sons go back to the old ways of corruption – READ v3.

So the people come to Samuel and say: this isn't good enough, we need a king – READ v5. Now this might sound like a reasonable request, but actually it has far-reaching implications. Let's rewind a little to understand why: up to this point – i.e. throughout the early history of Israel from Abraham to now – Israel had no king. They had God's appointed leaders – Moses, Joshua, judges like Gideon and Samson, then Samuel the priest – but no King.

This is very significant – there's lots of great leaders in that list, but they were *never* called kings. **There was only one King – the Lord God.** God ruled His people directly through the law, the tabernacle and the sacrificial system, and I guess the reason is obvious when you think about it. He couldn't risk it. Although he'd created human beings to be servant kings like him (and that's one amazing way to understand what it means to be made in God's image – we are servant rulers), the story of creation is that we'd chosen to be our own kings. So the only way God's chosen people would get a righteous king was if God did it himself. Samuel himself said as much to the Israelites a few chapters later (12:12): 'The Lord your God was your king'.

So when God's people ask for a king, it's not surprising that God responds as He does in v7: READ. What the people want is a God replacement. And God tells Samuel to give them a pretty blunt assessment of what will happen if they to upgrade from a judge or a prophet or a priest to a human monarch:

- Forced labour – READ v11 – and not just the men – READ v13.
- Favourites and abuse of patronage – READ v14-15. Note the significance of verse 15 – the tithe was meant for God – now it will go to the king's cronies.
- King will also increase his own wealth and power – READ v16
- Ultimately, the end result? - READ v17. Oh it all looked so good on paper – but the end result: slavery.

It's no surprise, then, to see Samuel's warning in v18 – be careful what you wish for: READ v18

Isn't this description a brilliant dissection of how power corrupts? On Friday the World Day of Prayer is focusing on Zimbabwe, and reflecting on these words this week, I must say it made me think of what's happened there over the last 40 years. When Mr Mugabe came to power in 1980 many people had high hopes. They saw him as dynamic, and committed to a free Zimbabwe. But looking back now, isn't this passage a chilling description of what happened next? Cronies taking all the privileges – and not just a tenth of the grain prophesied by Samuel, but many farms in their entirety. The ruler increasing his own power base, so that he gets re-elected every few years, and the end result – virtual slavery for the people. Even after he's gone, the situation under the new regime is just as bad, perhaps even worse.

You see, as human beings we can't do it. In our own strength we can't rule justly for any length of time. Power corrupts.

But look at the Israelites in verse 19-20: READ v19-20. I don't know about you, but it reminds me of a child throwing a tantrum, foot stamping and everything: 'oh, it's not fair, *all* my friends are going to watch this film, all my friends have this toy or this pair of trainers, their mums and dads are letting them.' (Parents recognise?) 'All the other nations have got a king. Why can't we have a king. It's not fair.' As Samuel directs them back to their home towns in verse 22, it feels like them stamping upstairs to their rooms in a huff. Slamming the door, putting the music on loud....

In the end God gives them what they want – READ v22. Can you almost hear the sense of weary resignation in his voice? Go on then, have it your way...

And what happens? – well, they pick the best guy they could find, at least they picked the handsomest bloke, as if that would be a good qualification for kingship – READ 9:2. But it doesn't take that long before it all goes pear-shaped. Saul doesn't cut it, and even David and Solomon had their flaws. After 3 kings, the kingdom is divided and, as they say, it's all downhill from there.

Viewed through the lens of leadership, the history of Israel really tells us two simple lessons:

We need godly rulers – it's what it means to bear the image of God and fulfil our true destiny in the world. We can debate the best form of governance for a society, but one way or another, we need godly leaders. You don't have to know much about world affairs to realise we need them now as much as ever. Even those who reject forms of political authority tend to find themselves following musicians or sports stars or even you-tubers. *We're made to worship someone.* The story of Israel is still our story; indeed as St Paul says in Romans, 'the whole creation itself waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.'

But secondly, **only God can be our Servant King**. It's who He is, it's the God we saw revealed at creation, and the God we were made to imitate. But after the Fall, one of the preoccupying themes of the bible is this: when will the true king come, the true righteous ruler, the one who will carry the authority of God in a godly, servant-hearted way? The prophets are full of promises that one day just such a person would come.

And of course, we see that fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is the true servant king – the monarch that us humans were made to be, the one the prophets promised, the One the people of Israel longed for, if only they could have known.

But how does this King of Kings live on earth? In humility, in poverty and relative anonymity, and ultimately, in total sacrifice. That's why we read the gospel reading from Matthew 27. What does the true king of the Jews look like? Like Jesus on a cross. If power corrupts, *the Son of God modelled a completely different way to rule*: exercising authority without power, strength without coercion, inviting followers to be led by him of their own free will.

Jesus still calls us to surrender to his Lordship – but what a different kind of Lordship it is – the power of love. So as I close, 3 simple applications:

- Is Jesus your Lord? Baptism service – Saviour (easy), Lord (hard) – the Christian faith is not just a path to follow, but a King to serve.
- Second, if Jesus is your Lord, is there an area of your life not given over to his Lordship?
- And finally, the fact that Jesus is Lord has a positive outcome too – He has all the authority of the universe at his disposal. Is there something where you need Jesus' power to change the situation? Today will you seize faith to believe again that Jesus can do that for you?