

GIVE US A KING

Pentecost 3 Year B

1 Sam 8:4-11 (12-15) 16-20 (11:14-15); Ps 138; 2 Cor 4:13-5:1; Mk 3:20-35

Gladstone 10/06/2018

A man dialled a wrong number, one day, and got the following recording: “I am not available right now, but I thank you for caring enough to call. I am making some changes in my life. Please leave a message after the beep. If I do not return your call, you are one of the changes.” I see this kind of thing on Facebook from time to time as people clear out their contact lists of “friends” they no longer wish to maintain.

Change is rarely easy? Sometimes we look forward to the kinds of changes that will improve our lot in life. But even then, it can still be difficult. We may look forward to losing some extraneous kilos but the rigours of dieting can be a difficult undertraining. That would also be true for giving up things like smoking or other kinds of substance abuse. But there are also other changes that we might *not* look forward to. For instance, having to move from your home of many years to move into a nursing home can be a difficult transition. I know it was for my parents.

And then there are changes that threaten to be thrust upon us that will upset our status quo. We find this a lot in churches—particularly as many diminish in attendance numbers. “We want to grow in numbers and draw many people from the surrounding community into our welcoming fold—but don’t change anything or I’ll get upset.” Sometimes we resist change that is good for us. Sometimes, rightly, we resist change that is not good for us. And sometimes, unfortunately, we seek and embrace change that is *not* good for us.

As we read in the first Book of Samuel, this morning, we find that Israel wanted a change. In fact, they were demanding it. “We want a king...like everybody else.” Samuel, their aging leader, was just not doing it for them. They were unhappy and wanted a change.

Today’s reading highlights a time in Israel’s history, after the Exodus from Egypt but before the founding of the Davidic Kingdom. During this period, Israel was not a united state but a loose confederation of tribes—and religious and civil authority was exercised, not by kings, but by individuals known as judges. Their role was a complex one—they were responsible for the oversight of religious practice and custom—they had a prophetic role, both teaching the people as well as acting as an intermediary with God—they dispensed justice and mediated over disputes—and they often commanded, or at least gave their blessing to, Israelite armies in their battles with neighbouring peoples. But they did all this, not as absolute rulers, but as “elders” who had the respect of the

people. Their authority was based, not on coercive power, but on persuasive consent—a bit like church council meetings.

At the beginning of today's reading, Samuel, perhaps the greatest and longest-serving of all the judges, is now an old man. He has appointed his sons to succeed him, but they are corrupt, perverting the course of justice and enriching themselves at the peoples' expense. And so the people come to Samuel to demand a replacement for his corrupt sons. Instead of calling for a new judge, however, they insist upon a king—someone who would rule over them just like the kings of “other nations”.

But why a king? Why not another judge? Well, the wider historical context gives us a bit of a clue. This time in history was a very troubled and unstable time. Many of the ancient kingdoms had collapsed and new threatening powers have risen in their place. The Philistines were expanding and had become a real threat to the Israelites. They had superior military technology—they had greater social cohesion—and they were centrally organized under the rule of kings. So, on the face of it, the people's request seems both pragmatic and reasonable.

In the light of this, then, one may wonder why God's response was so negative. What's the deal here? Well, the critical question here, was whether a kingship that was just like “other nations” was consistent with the kingship of God over Israel. Remember also, that in the ancient Middle East, kings tended to assume divine attributes in order to both legitimize and enforce their royal authority.

In contrast, God's covenant with Israel suggests that Israel is *not* to be like other nations—that rather, it is to be the “light to other nations” that will bring the world into relationship with God. This stresses the necessity of Israel *not* responding to its neighbours on the same terms with which its neighbours respond to Israel and to one another. To enter into a kingship that is like that of “other nations” is to embrace the protocols and assumptions of international politics and diplomatic intrigue.

By contrast, God's relationship with Israel stresses the primacy of God's sovereignty and of God's covenant over the prerogatives of political or social necessity. Israel's task is to neither fear nor seek security from its neighbours—rather; it is to invite them into the same covenant relationship into which it has already been invited by God.

In other words, Israel is not to seek security through being like the “other nations” but instead is to embrace, in faith, the insecurity that recognizes the need for risk and uncertainty—indeed, which recognizes that the very act of relationship with the God who is both hidden and yet revealed, *of necessity* involves a certain level of difficulty and danger. Relationship with God does not bring security and certainty—the divine presence in human life does not assure us of happy endings or protections from the ups and downs of human existence. Rather, it opens us to a way of life in which the richness of being—the fullness and abundance of life in all its fullness—is made available to us.

Hence, the dire warning, which God issues through Samuel presents the people of Israel with a stark choice—the risk and uncertainty of relationship, or the heavy yoke of security. A yoke that will include high taxation and the conscription of young people into the king’s service—not just to provide military security, but also will serve to feed the greed of those in power. This is the dark side of security—the surrender of their own sovereignty. And it doesn’t end there.

The price of this security will be counted, not merely in tax and conscription, but in spiritual terms—at the cost of the nation’s soul. And this will occur not merely in the form of the Israelites introducing Philistine deities into their worship of God—it will also come in the form of idolatry—which will take Israel inevitably down the path of tyranny and oppression—leading to a corruption of their relationship with God—and, in turn, their own self-destruction.

And, indeed, Scripture records that Israel got what it wanted: Saul, ineffectual and tragic; David, successful but flawed; Solomon, glorious but oppressive. And after Solomon, a civil war, the kingdom divided, and the slow decline into defeat and Exile, much of it precipitated by kings who were tyrannical, corrupt, and brutal. In today’s reading they are given a foreshadowing of this future-history and are warned against it—but, as is often the case, the people don’t listen. They discover too late that the uncritical desire for security, results in alienation from God and the destruction of everything they try to keep safe.

In the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt, God led the people from bondage to freedom. Through Moses, God led them to create a radical social society based on love and justice, but the “lure of conformity was seductive” and they could not sustain it. And before we judge them too harshly, we might remember another piece of our own history. Jesus came, offering a similarly radical social reality, which he called

the Kingdom of God. And people bought into it wholeheartedly. They gave their lives to share it with others.

In the early years, in this radical social reality, people joined together across the lines of social status and income level and race and creed. In the early years, they refused the use of violence and women and men worked together as equals. But the lure of conformity and the pressure toward cultural accommodation was great and soon Christians were serving in the Roman army and women were assigned second-class status. And we can see right throughout church history a progression of this mind-set—of the church becoming so integrated into society that it loses its “differentness” to the world around it.

And then we come to today. We may not want a temporal king to rule us, but we still choose bondage over abundant life. We want to choose our own king—including the king of “self”. We still allow other gods to take the rightful place of the true God. We, who are followers of Jesus, have, in many ways, succumbed to the pressures to accommodate the culture around us so many times. So much so, that we can’t even tell when it happens any more.

Where, then, is security for the Christian found? In times of uncertainty and instability, where does our security lay? How do we respond to the pressures around us to conform—to be like “the other nations” or at least to be like other people who seem to have it all? How are we to exercise our “differentness” in the society around us? What is to be our response?

As Paul says in today’s reading from his second letter to the Corinthians, which you heard earlier—and this, I think is a great response. Paul writes...

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸ because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (*2 Cor. 4:16-18*)

This is our response.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.