

Last week in the Benefice we started a new sermon series on King David . And as we started that we also started looking at aspects of the Old Testament as a whole. I rather think sometimes we are almost frightened to delve into the Old Testament: it seems to be a book riddled with huge numbers of complicated laws that seem pretty irrelevant these days; there is a frightening amount of violence; and sometimes God seems to be, well, almost unjust. But the point is that the Old Testament are the scriptures that Jesus would have had – as his bible if you like; it was the story on which the Jewish people, which included Jesus himself, based their faith in God, and it contains countless predictions of the coming Messiah – who was Jesus himself. So we cannot afford to ignore it, and hence this sermon series.

Last week, as an introduction to the Old Testament I talked about (in Thriplow) and displayed (in Shepreth) a timeline which shows what happened when – and for those of you missed that there are copies of that timeline with your notice sheet today.

And on the back of that timeline you will find a summary of what I am going to focus on now, which is the story of the Old Testament, which can be broken down into 6 acts – each act containing several scenes. And the reason I am doing that is the same as we had the timeline last week – it is show where King David fits into the big picture of the Old Testament.

So, Act 1, God creates the world but things go wrong. In fact they went so wrong that God almost destroyed the world, then he started it off again, but it went wrong again. So not a great start really. So that's the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

In Act 2, God called a particular family through which to bring the world blessing and promised that family its own land. This is where Abraham enters the story – God promising Abraham that he would build a nation on him – despite his lack of children. But in time Isaac came along, and then Jacob, and all his sons, and Joseph, and that coat – and then Moses enters the story, and he took the people to the edge of the promised land, on the way receiving the laws from God on Mount Sinai.

So that is the rest of Genesis, and the rest of those first 5 books of the Old Testament sometimes called the Pentateuch, sometimes the Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Act 3, the next generation did occupy the promised land led by Joshua, and divided it amongst their clans – the 12 tribes of Israel, based on the 12 sons of Jacob – but gradually they became more rebellious – and then asked for a King, and got Saul, David and Solomon – who built the temple. And this is the act that we are focussing on – or one scene in that act. This covers the books of Joshua through to the early part of 1 Kings.

Act 4. The nation split into two towards the end of Solomon's reign after Solomon disobeyed God – Ephraim (sometimes called Israel) in the North and Judah in the South. Ephraim became very disloyal to God and was conquered by Assyria – Judah not much better and later was conquered by Babylon as recorded in most of the books of Kings and Chronicles – with the Exile being recorded nearly at the end of Jeremiah.

Act 5. Persia replaced Babylon as superpower and allowed Judah to restore the temple as recorded in the last 4 verses of Jeremiah

Act 6. Greece replaced Persia, then its empire fell apart – split into the Seleucid Empire (in Syria) and Ptolemaic Empire (in Egypt), and took turns controlling Judah. The Seleucids sought to impose pagan worship in Jerusalem – Judahites rebelled, God rescued them, and they remained independent until the Romans arrived. And this is recorded in the book of Maccabees – in the Apocrypha, which are books written in the Old Testament era but are not accepted as being part of the Old Testament canon by the

Day:

Sermon Series

Date:

protestant church, although some are accepted by the catholic church. For us today they are another source of history.

Which all covers the big picture of the story of the Old Testament, and today, and indeed this sermon series, we are focussing on Act 3, and King David, but first, what happened before King David. And most significantly of all, what happened was a man called Samuel.

Last week we covered his birth, and his calling by God – when the 12 year old Samuel who was living in the temple under the care of a priest called Eli, thought he heard Eli calling during the night but it turned out to be God calling him.

So, what happened next?

Before we look at this morning's part of the story it is worth mentioning a similarity between Eli and Samuel – that was in fact very pertinent to our story today. Both Eli and Samuel were very good, very holy men, who loved God and served him in any way that they possibly could. They also both had 2 sons – and those sons did not follow in their father's footsteps. Eli's sons were particularly nasty pieces of work, they were called Hophni and Phinehas, and basically broke all the rules of the temple to line their own pockets and, shall we say, took advantage of some of the female temple servants. In fact on the night that God called Samuel, God told Samuel about Hophni and Phinehas, and how they would both die on the same day – which indeed they did – and in the morning Eli insisted on Samuel telling him what the Lord had said. That must have been a difficult conversation for the 12 year old Samuel.

When Samuel grew up he became what I guess you could call, the chief judge of Israel. He would tour around settling disagreements. He was also the spiritual leader of the country as God's appointed chief judge, and so he was heavily involved in the battle which the Israelites had with the Philistines which at one stage involved the capture of the ark of the covenant by the Philistines, and then, after the Philistines were struck by various plagues, the return of the Ark to the Israelites. But the country of Israel was being run by God, through Samuel, and that started to become an issue for the Israelites. Why? Well one reason was Samuel's sons.

In the verses immediately before our reading this morning we are told that when Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons Joel and Abijah to be his successors. 'But his sons did not walk in his ways', we are told. 'They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.' Interestingly Samuel doesn't appear to defend his sons, but neither does he try and correct them.

Samuel is old, we are told – although not so old that he doesn't appear significantly several more times in our story – and one of the people's concerns must be that they don't like or trust, quite rightly, his successors as judges, so they ask for a King to run their country – hopefully honestly.

It doesn't seem like an unreasonable request does it? But isn't God's initial response interesting? Samuel was displeased with the people for making their request but what God said was, "Listen to what the people are saying to you. It is not you, Samuel, that the people are rejecting. It is me – as they have done ever since I brought them out of Egypt. So listen to them but warn them what having a King will be like." So that's what Samuel tried. He tried very hard trying everything he knew. A King will control what you do with your lives – and not only your lives but your children's lives. And a King will tax you left right and centre. He will take some of your servants and some of your animals."

But it was to no avail. We want a King. We want to be like our neighbouring nations with a King to lead us and lead our armies into battle. And God gave in and said – give them what they want.

That's interesting as well isn't it. God gave the people what they wanted – even though he knew they were making a huge mistake. But, this is God giving us the one thing that as human beings we seem to crave over everything else – our free will. We always seem to want to be able to make our own decisions: we don't want someone to make them for us.

Nothing has changed really has it. I haven't heard it yet during this election campaign but I remember in a previous campaign complaints that what some politicians were advocating amounted to a nanny state – we as individuals are not capable of making our own minds up, of making the right choices: what is being proposed is the state making those decisions for us.

But God is saying exactly the opposite. You want a King. You can have a King. And then see what happens. And in the coming weeks we will see what does happen as first Saul, then David, then Solomon become King and the country falls apart.

But today, let's see what this passage is saying to us. The people of Israel have rejected God in favour of a human leader.

Going back in time before Samuel to Moses, and the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. What kept on happening. The Israelites would be thirsty, or the Israelites would be hungry, or the Israelites would just be fed up because according to their now suspect memories they were more comfortable back in Egypt – and what did they do? Well what they didn't do was to complain to God. Instead they complained to the man who God had put in front of them – poor old Moses. Did the Israelites at these points see Moses as God's earthly agent? No, they just saw him as someone to moan at, and whilst I'm sure that Moses got fed up of this, it was nothing compared to how we are told God felt – when his people were rejecting him.

And today. Well, what I'm not going to do is to stand here and say, 'All those people out there have rejected God and chosen to follow human instincts', because actually I'm going to challenge us to see to what extent we treat God as our King today. How do we make our choices? Do we trust God at those vital moments in our lives when we are not sure what to do? And where does the balance lie between asking God, and waiting for a reply, and doing things on our own?

You see, despite this decision that the Israelites have made, to have a King, that decision is not, in itself, completely defying the rules.

The Israelites followed the law as laid down by Moses in the book of Deuteronomy and elsewhere, and in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 17, we find this:

“You are about to enter the land the Lord your God is giving you. When you take it over and settle there, you may think, ‘We should select a king to rule over us like the other nations around us.’ If this happens, be sure to select as king the man the Lord your God chooses.’

So there was nothing wrong with selecting a King – but what was wrong was their reasoning for why they wanted a King – to be like other nations.

When we make our choices in life it is very easy to make our choices based on what everyone else does, but perhaps sometimes we have to be prepared to stop and think, “Is this what God really wants me to do?”

We have a tendency to assess our problems mechanically rather than spiritually. If something we are doing is not working as we would expect, we assume there is something wrong with the practicalities of how we are doing it, rather than asking God, “Is this actually what we should be doing?”

Day:

Sermon Series

Date:

But I don't think that's the end of it either. If we do ask God, "Is this what we should be doing?" or even, "Is this how we should be doing it?", it is all too easy for us to say, "Lord, we have decided this is the solution – will you bless it?" rather than, "Lord what is the solution?" and waiting.

Free will is a wonderful thing. The ability, the opportunity to make a choice to follow Jesus Christ as our Saviour, to choose to live the sort of life that Jesus showed us how to live; to choose to do what we feel he is calling us to do, or to actually say, no Lord, I can't do that, is vital to our Christian Faith. A system where we can only choose to say Yes, and never opt to say No, is surely a flawed system – because otherwise there is no choice. There is no free will.

And actually let me finish by saying this. If someone says to you that they feel that God is calling you to do something, and you go away and pray about it, and you get no sense of that call yourself, saying No is a perfectly correct response. But before you say No do ask God first for his guidance. It is sometimes the case that other people see something in you that you cannot see for yourself so do listen to them, and then listen to God. To jump ahead in our story, there was a young man, the youngest of a number of brothers, who was spending his life out on the hills looking after sheep, and out of nowhere came a stranger who told him that God had chosen him to be the next King of Israel, and anointed him as such. Always be prepared for the unexpected.

Amen