

The reading in this series that we are following, on King David, given to us this week by the lectionary moves the story on considerably from where we got to last week. So later I am going to try and give you a synopsis of what, if you like, we have missed. But first, as we look at the Old Testament as a whole I would like us to very briefly address the issue of Fact and Truth in the Old Testament.

If the Old Testament is wholly reliable as a guide to who God is, who we are, and how we may relate to God, must it be factual at every point to be really the Word of God? I guess that, particularly when they come across a passage that is very difficult to understand, that is the sort of question people can ask. Do I have to believe this stuff in order to follow Jesus?

There is quite a spectrum of views on this question. At one end is the conviction that the whole of the Old Testament is literally factual. God created the world in 6 days; all of Israel's ancestors were involved in the Exodus; Jonah was swallowed by a fish. The list goes on. Somewhere in the middle is the view that the Old Testament story is basically reliable history, but none of those specific elements need to be factual. And at the other end of the spectrum is the view that the Old Testament is basically a very imaginative story created in late Old Testament times.

And surrounding all these views there are variations on them whereby people almost have a bit of one and a bit of the other – perhaps David existed; perhaps Ezra the prophet existed, but perhaps some of the earlier stories around Moses, for example, are there to teach us about God rather than give us a history lesson. I consider myself to be very much somewhere in the middle.

But what is important about the Old Testament is that whatever it is, it is the word of God – it is God inspired writing – and so if it is not necessarily historically accurate, we needn't worry. And the reason we are so confident it is God's word is not because we can show it is history, because we probably can't for a lot of it; it is not that we can identify some parts as fact, and therefore we interpret those one way, and that other parts are fiction, and we interpret those a different way. No. The basis of our assurance that the Old Testament is God's word is that Jesus gave it to us and it speaks to us. It was the scripture that Jesus read, studied, believed in, and, whilst he may well have argued with some people's interpretations of those scriptures, he followed it. We don't believe in Jesus because of the authority of scripture; we believe in Scripture's authority because we know that Jesus is God's Son. I trust the Old Testament because I trust Jesus, not the other way round.

So, in seeking to discover what God wanted to say through the Old Testament, and what God wants to say to us through it, we can read it as it is without fretting about where lies the boundary between the history and, elaboration, because we know it is true even when it is not factual. And that really applies to what we are looking at today.

So, as I said, the story has moved on considerably since last week when the Israelites asked God for a King, and God said, "Yes".

And then between last week's readings and this the following happens

Samuel anoints a tall, good looking, young man called Saul to be the first King of Israel. He was God's choice.

Saul then becomes King

Saul rescues the city of Jabesh which was threatened by Nahash, the leader of the Ammonites.

This confirms Saul's position as King with the Israelites.

Samuel makes a farewell speech to Israel as their chief judge, saying that you have your King, which is fine, but do not stop following God.

Saul was 30 when he became king and reigned for 42 years. Actually, that may not be true. It is what the bible translators have worked out is the most likely number of years in both cases, but the numbers

were missing from the original Hebrew text. But as we have just seen, that doesn't really matter except that if you look at 1 Samuel 13 v1 in your bible, you will probably see those numbers with brackets around them.

Saul then created the first organised permanent militia in Israel – about 3,000 men, up until that point any Israeli army was created for a single purpose and then disbanded, and Jonathan, making his first appearance as Saul's son, led the Israelites in defeating a Philistine garrison – of which there were many around. But Saul took the credit for the victory – not even his own Son could be given credit for a military victory – 1st sign of pride creeping in, which God would have been dismayed by.

We then have some slightly confusing, possibly repeating stories, about battles between Israel and the Philistines, the historical accuracy of which doesn't matter greatly, where Saul gets two things wrong:

First, Samuel tells Saul to wait for 7 days as the armies of Israel and the Philistines faced each other on opposite sides of Beth Aven for God's instructions.

Saul did wait, but then, as some of his soldiers started to disappear in fear of the significantly larger Philistine army, decided to go ahead and made burnt and fellowship offerings when he wasn't a priest. Samuel then criticised Saul and told him, in effect, he should have waited for God's command, even though the 7 days were up, and so was no longer following God's leadership. If he had got this right his Kingdom would have been established for all time. Samuel wasn't saying that God would replace Saul yet, but that Saul's son would not succeed him as God would pick a successor. So that's the first part of Saul's downfall if you like.

The second refers to Saul attacking the Amalekites and God telling Saul to completely destroy them. Why did God want them completely destroyed? The Amalekites stand for opposition to God's purpose that is designed to bring about the redemption of the world. Amalek was a descendant of Abraham and Sarah and of Isaac and Rebekah, so the Amalekites were distant relatives of the Israelites, but we are told in Exodus 17 that they attacked the Israelites when they were on their way from Egypt to Sinai: indeed in Deuteronomy we are told that they attacked the weak stragglers at the back of the procession of the Israelites – and thus they represent a symbol for people with no reverence for God – which is why God commanded that they should be destroyed completely. And Saul did not do that – allowing some of their sheep and cattle to be kept by his soldiers. So Saul's reluctance to do what God says causes God to 'regret' making him King, and so God has to change his plan.

The Old Testament often refers to God's having a change of plan or a change of mind. This reflects the real nature of God's relationship with us. God does not just decide things ahead of time and implement them regardless of what happens. How God relates to us interacts with our decisions and our lives. Saul's unwillingness to do what God said about Amalek is just as bad as if he had started worshipping another God.

In contrast, at the end of this story, Samuel warns Saul that God will not have a change of mind or a change of plan in such a way as to decide that after all Saul can continue as king. That declaration reminds us that while God does act in interaction with us, God is not fickle or arbitrary.

We don't have to be afraid of God sometimes having a change of plan, as if that is a threat to us when we are walking in God's way. Indeed most references to God having a change of plan refers to God giving up the idea of bringing trouble to someone. If Saul really had turned back to God, even he could have been restored. But that didn't happen.

Which all brings us to today's part of the story, and David finally makes his entry – but not until the end of our reading. First we have this quite touching beginning where we hear about how Samuel genuinely felt sorry for Saul – in different versions of the bible we read that Saul grieved for, or mourned for Saul.

Samuel did not go to see Saul again. As Saul had been rejected by God, so must he also be rejected by Samuel. And God also was sorry that he had made Saul King.
So why did God choose Saul.

We are told that Saul was good looking, a big man, clearly one who could easily by his outward appearance gain the respect of the people of Israel – but despite all that, despite what seemed like a promising beginning, inwardly, he got it wrong.

And it rather sounded as if God got slightly impatient with Samuel. “How long are you going to grieve over Saul – after all I have rejected him? You’ve got another job to do – to find and anoint his successor.” And then we get a delightful story where God is showing Samuel that he is not averse to playing the odd trick on people to achieve what he wants. Samuel is concerned that if Saul finds out what he is doing then Saul will have him killed, so God creates a story for him so that people think he is going to make a sacrifice – a perfectly reasonable thing for a priest to do – no suspicious activities there. Then the elders in Bethlehem get worried as the arrival of a prophet is usually bad news – but Samuel reassures them that he comes in peace, sticking to his story that he has come to make a sacrifice.

And then Samuel meets up with Jesse and his tall, attractive, sons – not dissimilar to Saul outwardly at least, and Samuel clearly thinks – this is easy. But God puts him right. “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him.” God is looking at these sons inwardly – but what is he looking for? Well, we have no idea. Nowhere in the bible when God is looking for someone to do a job do we find out what it is He is looking for. All we know is that God chooses people – and as we have already talked about, it doesn’t always work out – but that is the fault of the chosen person not of the chooser.

But when Jesse finally produces his youngest son, David, God says – yes, this is the one. Now, I don’t know about you, but I always the picture of David as a young lad, perhaps slightly puny, banished to the hills to look after the sheep. But we are told that he was a handsome young man, he was used to being outside in the heat so was presumably well tanned, he protected the sheep so was probably quite muscular – all a bit like Saul, but God didn’t let that stand in his way – because God looked at him inwardly.

And finally on David for today – because as of next week we really focus on David, let me point out this comparison between Saul, who God rejected, and David, who God never did.

Saul made mistakes – but those mistakes were all about disobeying God – coming very close, if not actually achieving, worshiping another deity. David made mistakes, one very famous mistake which we will come back to later in this sermon series, but he never stopped worshipping God, so God forgave him. Whatever happens in life the message from this is clear – stay close to God.

So, let me finish by very briefly linking this to our gospel (New Testament) reading this morning, and I think there is a really powerful message for us, here, this morning from these two readings.

God called David from nowhere really. A life that started out in the fields, looking after sheep, which was one of the lowest, most demeaning jobs in Israel at the time, out of something that started so small, came the King from whom the rest of the bible emanates. From something so small, came something so significant.

Our gospel (New Testament) reading talks about seeds, such small things, growing into something so much larger. God only needs something small to create something much larger.

Sometimes we can, if we are not careful, look at our churches in these 4 villages and think they are so small, how can we possibly create the church that we feel God wants; that is simply beyond us. David, I believe, and the farmers that set those seeds, I believe, as long as we stay close to God, as long as we

Readings: 1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13 What went wrong with King Saul?
Mark 4: 26-34

Thriplow and Shepreth

stay worshipping God, as long as we don't get diverted into doing things in our churches under our strength alone, would fundamentally disagree. Anything is possible with God.
Amen