

Whilst we are sort of continuing with our sermon series on King David, I am finding more and more that what we have is an Old Testament backdrop to the messages that comes from the New Testament reading each Sunday – and of course that is how it should be. So today I am going to concentrate again on our Gospel reading, having first had a quick look at what is happening to King David, and what we can learn from what is going on.

We left David last week grieving the death of Israel's first anointed King – King Saul, and Saul's son, and David's very close friend, Jonathan. And we saw how David would not criticise Saul, even though Saul tried to kill him on at least two separate occasions, because Saul was anointed by God – so with the faith that David had in God no criticism was possible.

On the death of Saul the people of Judah, where Samuel had anointed David as a future King of Israel, accepted David as King, but the people of Israel crowned Saul's son Ish-Bosheth as King. And we then get a period of 7 years of violence between individuals really from the House of Saul in Israel and the House of David in Judah.

A few more people to mention. The son of Ner, who was Saul's army commander, was called Abner, and Abner was responsible for making Ish-Bosheth King of Israel. David had three nephews – Joab, Asahel and Abishai, and after a skirmish between the Houses of Saul and David, Abner killed Asahel.

Over the next few years the power of the House of David increased and the House of Saul decreased – as a result of which Abner and Ish-Bosheth argued and Abner went over to David. But David's nephew Joab hadn't realised that David was now friendly with Abner, and Joab killed Abner in revenge for Abner having killed Joab's brother Asahel.

Finally further rivalries in the House of Saul camp ended with the King Ish-Bosheth being killed, and David had Ish-Bosheth's killers executed. As a result of all that, the people of Israel finally said, "We want David to be our King too" which is what was happening at the beginning of our first reading. So God's chosen people now all had God's chosen one as their King.

We then had this story about how Jerusalem became the capital of all Israel. Up until this point Jerusalem had been independent of both Judah and Israel, but David conquered the city from the Jebusites and the City of David was born, and David became more powerful – because the Lord God Almighty was with him. Well, at the end of a somewhat gruesome period in the history of God's chosen people, we have what is surely the most comforting line of scripture that we have heard for some time: "David became more and more powerful – because the Lord God Almighty was with him." Perhaps powerful is not a word we are necessarily comfortable with today – but the link to our New Testament reading is very strong indeed – as we shall see.

Our Gospel reading gives us one of the saddest stories of Jesus' ministry – but perhaps also one of the biggest warnings for us today.

Jesus has returned to his hometown and is rejected. Do you know, before he got there I do wonder what sort of reception he expected. Back at the end of chapter 3 of Mark's gospel we had these verses:

'Then Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him. They stood outside and sent word for him to come out and talk with them. There was a crowd sitting around Jesus, and someone said, "Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you."

Jesus replied, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then he looked at those around him and said, "Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." '

So I'm not really sure how he expected his family to react when he goes back to Nazareth. But then it isn't actually his family who are the issue. At first all seems to be going well. The people at the synagogue seem to be quite impressed with what this teacher is saying – in fact we are told that they were astounded or amazed. That is quite a strong reaction from the locals.

But then the reaction changed. Isn't this the carpenter? That is not just a simple question – that is a challenge as to who on earth this man is who is having the cheek to try and teach them in the temple. 'Isn't this the carpenter?' And it gets worse. "Isn't this Mary's Son?"

In Jewish culture you would only reference a man's mother like that if you wanted to insult them – even when the man's father is dead, which we suspect Joseph probably was.

And they took offence at him. Whilst I can kind of see why, it does remain a bit of a mystery as to exactly why they took offence at him. Again, as is so often the case in the New Testament, we need to be guided by those who can explain translations to us – and here, what Mark is doing is picking up one of his favourite topics, because what he is saying is that because of the local's reaction to him, Jesus has become something of a stumbling block to people's faith in God. Which is borne out by Jesus' last reaction in this section when Mark tells us that he was amazed at their unbelief.

So much was their unbelief he could not do any miracles there, except lay hands on a few sick people and heal them. If I was to lay hands on a few sick people and heal them then I would be rather pleased, but not for Jesus. But most importantly, it was their lack of faith, their unbelief that stopped Jesus doing miracles there.

I don't know about you but I have heard a line of so called Christian teaching that says that for some reason, miracles stopped happening when those first apostles' ministry ended. If you like miracles ended with the ending of the apostolic period. But is that true? What is the first judge we use when trying to determine answers to questions like that? Is it biblical? Did the bible say that at the end of this apostolic period miracles would cease?

No of course not – the bible has no concept of such a period of time, and for me the writings of the Acts of the apostles and letters in the New Testament are all about an ongoing church, an ongoing faith in Jesus Christ.

But in Nazareth, there were no miracles because the people there would not honour Jesus. Their unbelief limited what Jesus could do among them. Lack of belief, lack of faith, was something that on many occasions Jesus rebuked his own disciples for. Peter walking on the water and sinking. The storm on Galilee where the disciples thought they would drown. The disciples failing to drive out a demon from someone.

The writer of Hebrews picks up this theme in chapter 3:12. "Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God."

And what about what Jesus will find when the promised second coming happens. From Luke 18:8: "But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?"

I believe that Christianity in this country is more under threat than it has ever been before. There is a powerful movement to secularise this country. We have just held a General Election and I for one heard very little reference to faith of any kind during that campaign – and that is exactly what I expected. And unless we try and do something about it, it will simply get worse.

Take Christmas for example. The very fact that we have to have catchy, slightly corny, phrases like, "Jesus is the reason for the season" to remind people that Christmas is indeed a Christian festival proves

the point. People objecting to religious messages in Christmas cards. In Christmas cards – it is getting, actually it has got, ridiculous.

So what should our response be? How do we attempt to get our country back to a place where God is at the centre, as he was for King David, rather than being an increasingly excluded deity?

Should we be angry? Jesus may have got angry once or twice, but that's not the message he pushed – he encouraged kindness, and helpfulness and love – and acknowledging the importance of those, leads us to repentance. So what do we do? I have four suggestions.

First, guard your heart. Be careful what you expose yourself to. Do you watch films, read books, that cause you to challenge your own faith, how you treat other people? Well don't. Do you have a 'friend' on Social Media who criticises the church, criticises Christians? Well, unfollow them. Protect, guard, your hearts.

Second, feed your heart, build your faith. Being in fellowship with other Christians is so important. As we in the 4 Churches look to develop new ways of supporting each other in our faith, in the building of that faith, be prepared to join in – even if you have to give something else up to do it.

Third, Pray for God's love. Look around you. See those things that we hate, and pray for God's love to put them right – not that we get angry about things, that other people get angry, but that people realise that God loves them, and if they reach out he will help them. Pray for individual people to come to know Jesus. Miracles haven't stopped happening.

And fourth, be prepared to share the hope that we have in Jesus. If we are to even start to turn around the decline of Christianity in our country then we have to do something, and we have to be ready – we have to prepare. I suspect that most people who, on hearing we attend church, want to criticise us for doing that are much more prepared in their statements of unbelief than we are in our statements of belief. If someone asked you tomorrow, "Why did you go to church yesterday?" then you must have an answer ready.

But let me finish with this. The second part of our Gospel reading this morning was all about sending his disciples out to teach the good news of Jesus; teaching them that they should repent. But they didn't go alone. They went in pairs. They supported each other. And if they were not listened to they went on their way to the next house, or street, or town. All we can do is tell people what we believe. If they choose not to accept that, or simply ignore that, then that is up to them. All Jesus asks us to do is to try. And that is my simple message this morning. As you leave this place today, spend time thinking about what you can do to play your part in building back up a Christian core to this village, this Benefice, this country, etc. Because that is what we are called to do.

Amen