

SERMON: 2018/06/10 (3rd Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - 1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15; Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 & Mark 3:20-35

[Invite children to the front.]

Jesus had been baptised in the south in Judea, [see: Mk. 1:5,9]; and He had been filled by the Holy Spirit, [v.10].

Then, He returned to the north to Galilee [v.14], where He began to do some *amazing* things including healing people who were very sick, [see: v.30-34,40-42; 2:3-12; 3:1-5].

So sick that even the doctors couldn't help them!

But nothing was impossible for Jesus' *powerful* love, and His miracles attracted *huge* crowds of spectators.

Well, finally, He arrived in His home-town [v.19], and His 'family' [v.21] - his 'mother and...brothers and sisters' [v.32] - they couldn't believe all this that they were hearing about Him: they thought He must be *crazy!*

And they tried to "*shoo!*" away Jesus' friends, and to stop Him from obeying God.

But Jesus, He didn't listen.

Because He knew there was something even more important than "family," and that was being with other Christians.

This, He said, "the Church," was the most important thing; and those next to you and around you right now are your family [v.34].

[Then, bending down, ask one of the children:]

Who's this?

[Wait for response. If necessary prompt: "Your family!" Or, "Your brother/sister." Repeat as necessary.]

Who's this?

Yes! That's right.

And this is hard for us to think that way, but that's what Jesus wants from us.

So, let's pray:

Father God, by Your Holy Spirit, help us to see that your Church is *our* family, and that we should treat other Christians as if they were our (actual) brothers/sisters/children, and love them accordingly. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

So, the 'elders' of the people of Israel came to Samuel one day and said, "'Give us a king...'"

And He did.

He approached a man called "Saul," and, by pouring fragrant oil over his head, enthroned him.

But notice how he did so only with the *greatest* of reluctance; with much protestation and hesitation.

There was no joyous trumpet fanfare, no adoring crowds of well-wishers, no "Exclusive!" interview in People magazine.

And if you'd been there and had been listening very closely, I think you might have heard the prophet's heart (audibly) "Crack(!)" as it broke in two by by an act, which felt to him as a terrible betrayal of the God that he loved.

And why?

Why wasn't the occasion one of rejoicing and parties, and why did it, we hear, "displease" Samuel to be at the very centre of a *key* moment for his nation? Why does the coronation seem to him to be *traitorous*?

Because it was.

Since time immemorial the Israelites had been a "league" - a league of tribes. An alliance of astonishing democratic, egalitarian modernism:

Essentially, there were 12 of them.

But they could be divided further into *mishpāhoth*, that is "clans;" and then those clans into smaller units called "*bēth-āvōth*" or families.

And it was the oldest males of those *bēth-āvōth* who were the decision-makers.

They consulted each other, debated, and chose what to do by persuasion.

Political authority, in other words, in Israel, was very "diffuse."^[n.1]

As was, by extension, wealth and authority.

Occasionally, in the Old Testament, in times of emergency, a charismatic figure emerged from among the ranks who *seemed* able to command *unilaterally* and *executively* - think of Moses or Joshua; but these situations, whilst they loom large in our imaginations and dominate the text too, were actually 'temporary ad hoc role assignments'.^[n.2]

And it was for this reason that, in 1775, New England's embattled ministers were 'riveted' by this early period and what they saw as an emblematic "Jewish *Republic*." For the blue-coated rebels, '[t]his was the Golden Age of mankind'.^[n.3] An inspiring example of a nation built around "brotherhood" *under the exclusive*

leadership of God,^[n.4] ordered by His will as revealed in the Bible.

And yet, now, '[i]n this dramatic confrontation[,] the [Israelite] elders propose to abandon that self-understanding, that vocation...[and] Samuel recognizes the implications of the request... Their request is nothing less than a change in Israel's foundational commitments...'^[n.5]

And this is why 'Samuel's speech is solidly constructed as a hammering piece of anti-monarchic rhetoric. ... A modern American reader might easily be reminded of the rhetoric of a radical libertarian inveighing against the evils of big government and the encroachments of its bureaucracies and taxation.'^[n.6] [Pause.]

If, then, what was being sought was outrageous, what was the reason for it? What could have prompted this crisis?

Well, actually, crisis:^[n.7]

The elders of Israel wanted 'a king to govern [them], like other nations' because those "other nations" (that they had in mind) were, at this point in history, beginning to attain an ascendancy over God's people:

Joshua's successes, you see, had been fragile.

And now a new group, the "Philistines," began arriving from the sea - likely taking advantage of the chaos and the power-vacuum that *he* created in Canaan.

They were almost like proto-Vikings.

And they could do something that the inhabitants couldn't - smelt iron, and make it into swords and armor, far superior to what the Israelites used, which was bronze and *even*, still, flint.^[n.8]

In the face of this terrible threat from the coast, the "elders" were trying to adapt; to *innovate* - and one of the things that they *could* copy from this new enemy was their stratified, hierarchical organization under warrior-tyrants.

Give us one of those, they asked.

A chiselled jaw-ed, alpha-male, Tom Cruise had a baby with Winston Churchill fighter-pilot macho go-getter.

That's what we need, they thought.

And Samuel relents - encouraged to do so by God Himself.

But even as he does as they ask, he *warns* them.

He warns them that they are wrong to prefer "what is done," of succumbing to convention and to fashion *over* and above the revealed plan that God offers.

And this remains true.

With the children I noted how Jesus, in a very challenging passage, elevates discipleship beyond commitments even to family-life and to the needs of relatives and our loved-ones.

And hearing this we feel a "tug" to "forsake" such a rule and, like the 'elders' of Israel, do as other nations around us, that is society at large.

And that's because we have been seduced by an idolatry of photogenic families living side-by-side in pretty houses in a new Heaven called, "suburbia;" encountering clean, well-pressed neighbors only at the mail-box and during "the Peace" on Sundays.

Now, '[t]he answer is not to *neglect* the family... We are not to abandon our marriages or ignore our children and throw them to the world to be corrupted! *Of course*, we should nurture our closest relationships. ...[and do so] for God's glory... Our marriages and families are to be the *first* place that we engage in [the] mission [that He's given us *as Christians*]'.[\[n.9\]](#)

But we need to grow and wrestle to see them as *merely, solely* the building blocks of something far more exciting and grandiose, and that's the thing we call "Church."

This is what Jesus cares about more than anything else: that's why He calls it His "bride."

And think on that: "*bride*," not "*wife*."

Not "*ball-n'-chain*."

Or, "*the ol' woman*."

Men, think how you felt on your wedding day; of that first glimpse of your girl, dressed in white, eager, hopeful.

Dwell in that moment. [\[Pause.\]](#)

And you, ladies, of seeing your groom at the end of aisle, or waiting on the town-hall steps.

The double-breasted powder-blue suit with the flares and the wide lapels.

Or in the hired kilt.

Remember how you smiled and smiled and sang and danced...

And *this* is how Jesus feels about the Church, which is why it deserves to be always given the top priority, *all* your treasure, *all* of your time, *all* of your *being*.

This is the vision we find being laid out for us in the New Testament.

And nothing less than that; although, "yes," our experience of the reality will have been - and remains(!) - *abysmally* divorced from such a utopia.

And why is that?

Because we shrink from devoting ourselves, *fully*, to the ambition of Christ, and so

suffer for it - inheriting disappointing churches and then doing little to improve them for the next generation.

But this needn't be so, and we've the chance, *today*, to be the difference.

And I know we're not accustomed to think in this way.

The pattern we see around us and the one we've likely adopted from our own parents is that Church, like "religion," is just for one day of the week; and yet consider those we (claim to) aspire to imitate and love: our Savior, the Son of God; His 12 Apostles; Saint Paul - every one of them was an unmarried individual focused "24/7" on preaching the Gospel and worshipping their Creator.

And we need to find ways in which to more genuinely embody that spirit - to reflect that example in this time and place.

Footnotes:

1. Gottwald, Norman K. (1980), *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 322.
2. *Ibid.*, 298.
3. Stout, Harry S. (2012), *The New England Soul: Preaching And Religious Culture In Colonial New England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 302.
4. Brueggemann, Walter (1990), *First and Second Samuel: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville, K. Y.: John Knox Press, 62.
5. See also: Murphy, Francesca Aran (2010), *1 Samuel*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Brazos Press (Baker Publishing), 57-64.
6. Alter, Robert (2013), *The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings*, New York, N. Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 278.
7. See: Herrmann, Siegfried (1981), *A History of Israel in Old Testament Times*, 2nd Edition, trans. by John Bowden, London: SCM Press, 131-132.
8. Graham, William Creighton and May, Herbert Gordon (1936), *Culture and Conscience: An Archaeological Study of the New Religious Past in Ancient Palestine*, Chicago, I. L.: The University of Chicago Press, 147.
9. Cross, Alan (2014), *When Heaven and Earth Collide: Racism, Southern Evangelicals, and the Better Way of Jesus*, Montgomery, A. L.: New South Books, 210. (My italics.)

