

## Sermon Archive 204

Sunday 10 June, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: 1 Samuel 8: 4-20

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In this episode, which might fit well into the compendium of history's worst decisions, we see the unfolding of a sort of slow motion train crash. There are four players in the drama, and this morning I want to look at each one of them, then think about where we, in perhaps some parallel situation, might be called into the work of God. Dramatis personae: Samuel, the prophet; the people; the king in waiting; and God.

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Samuel has been a prophet since he was about eleven years old. Disturbed three times one night by a voice he didn't understand, it was realised, eventually, that God was calling. Unlike other boys, Samuel had a sense of God in the world, of spiritual responsibility, of the need to listen, of the benefit of discovering the right thing to do. Interestingly, one of the first right things he was called to do was to tell his mentor, an old priest called Eli, that he (Samuel) is taking over because Eli's sons were not fit to inherit the prophetic role. They'd become decadent and uninterested. So from the start, the prophetic role has required of Samuel not only perceptiveness, but also candour and bravery of speech. It's also steeped in the knowledge that prophecy requires nurturing and commitment. If you fall into not caring, then the role is taken away from you. Samuel goes into his prophetic work, as a child, already aware that the task has been taken away from others in his generation. It's a high duty, but fragile.

In our situation, is there a community called to listen carefully for a particular insight? A community which believes it has access to a rich vein of wisdom? Is there a community with a sense of God in the world, seeking to do the right thing? If there *is*, is part of its history an experience of having lost its role, lost its relevance to the people? I wonder. Does that sound like the institutional church?

Anyway, as mentioned already, from a very young age Samuel has been brave and responsible. Over the years he's done his work faithfully. Yet today the people come to see him. They say "you're old, and your sons don't follow in your ways".

Somehow, somewhere along the way, the people have disengaged from Samuel. How did that happen? Somehow he's failed to pass on what needed to be passed on. Somehow the connection between his rich tradition and the real life of the world has broken. Just like Eli's sons before him, it looks like Samuel's being voted out. Such is Samuel's hurt, that he turns to prayer - he talks to God. That's our first character.

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The second character is the people. They're about to make a terrible decision. It will lead them into one of their nation's low points. Towards the bad decision, what's driving them? Well, the first thing, as mentioned already, is their disengagement from the insights of the prophet. And while that disengagement may not be entirely their *fault*, it's certainly their *problem*. Without the engagement, they're forgetting who they are. The prophet reminded them of to whom they belonged. The prophet reminded them of their "formation stories" - Exodus, the Law, the special covenant. He told what about them was unique. But now we find them saying "we want a king, because all the other nations have one. Don't tell us how we are different. Enable us to be the same." Everyone else does it like this - let's do it like that as well. Captivated by the fad of sameness.

The other thing the people say is that they want a king, "because a king will go out before us", they say, "and fight our battles". The people are about to make their bad decision, because they are driven by a desire to fight battles. I suppose there are times when nations feel that a battle is necessary. There may be times when certain things need defending, certain injustices need to be righted. But to base your whole system of government on war-readiness, on orientation for conflict, seems odd. That would be something like having a constitutional right to bear arms while your children keep getting shot and killed at school. It would be like having a new, growing nuclear capacity while your people are hungry on the farm. It wouldn't make sense! Why would you allow your culture, your identity, your politics, to be shaped primarily by violence?

I don't know why. But certainly the people now have got to the point of insisting on what they want. They want to be like the other nations. And they want to be ready for war. They have reached a point where they don't want to explore alternatives. In their condition of spiritual atrophy, in their condition of having ceased to listen prophetically, they know what they want: a sabre-rattling king. The people are our second character.

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The third character. At this point in the story, no one knows who the king will be, but the king's nature already pervades the scene. From within the conversation that the prophet is having in prayer, the king's character is emerging. The king will **not** fight battles for the people; the people shall fight battles for the king. This will not be an experience in which the people are distanced from the fight. This will be an experience where people lose their children to the fight. Their children are becoming chariot drivers, horsemen, little figures running, exposed, vulnerable before the chariots - chariot fodder. (What are they doing there? Obeying the king.) Others will be pressed into the manufacture of weapons. Some will be turned into workers, and others into slaves. This will be the kind of experience where the people's wealth is given to courtiers - favoured others who do not serve or work.

The king is not a participant in the story yet, but already notice is given that he's out there. In the world, there are indeed people, waiting for anointing, who will use their power only for their own benefit. In the world, there are people who see others not as dignified bearers of the image of God, but as slaves and chariot fodder. Are you sure that you want to give power to such a person? And this is not simply about government and constitution. In an **employment situation**, do you want to give power to someone who only wants to use you? In a **marriage**, do you want to give power to someone who only wants to disempower you? In **any kind of human interaction** (humans can be hurt and broken), do you want to give power to people who are incapable of caring? The answer is "no; you don't want to be doing that". But this story was introduced, at the start of the sermon, as a "slow motion train crash"; and the people, disengaged from the prophet, have chosen their path. The king will emerge. And that's our third character.

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The final character is God, the One to whom the hurting prophet speaks - speaks about this awful decision. You'd think, wouldn't you, that a god, any wise and powerful god, would insist on his or her own way. In a flourish of sovereignty, or a flash of omnipotence, the god would sweep aside the bad decision, because "god knows best". But **this** God does none of that. This God accepts the people's decision. It's almost as if this one is moved by something other than power, other than being right. This God seems to be accepting of

the people's autonomy, their freedom to make mistakes. This God doesn't insist on control. (Yet not my will, but yours be done. Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.) This God gives room for error. It isn't indifference. An indifferent god wouldn't bother with things like informed consent - wouldn't bother warning the people - pointing out to them the implications of their decisions. The indifferent god would just say "O well". **This** God says "you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them". This God treats the people as morally aware, self-responsible people, able to hear the reason of the prophet. There is no nanny state in this story. God puts the truth before the people and lets them decide. That is the work of God.

The other thing that God does, is comfort the prophet. God says to Samuel "don't take it hard. This is not a rejection of **you**." In fact God says more. God says "they haven't rejected you; they've rejected **me**". God takes the blame away from the hurting prophet. God says "give that blame to me. I will carry it for you." (Come unto me all you who labour, and are heavy laden; and I will give you rest.) That is the work of God.

Then God continues to work with the prophet - and walk with the people. God continues to create insight for the prophet and comfort for the people. God bears with them (being their wisdom, their forgiveness, their redeemer) through the debacle of the next few decades. The house of the dreadful king will eventually fall, and when it does, God will still be there. And maybe that, faithfulness, also, is the work of God.

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Where have we come to? Treating others as decision-makers, respecting their choices. The work of God. Making clear the implications of the paths we choose, speaking truth and giving insight. The work of God. Comforting the discouraged prophets, taking the hurts of others upon ourselves. The work of God. Hanging in there with the people - forgiving, being present right through the whole complication - community, commitment, solidarity. The work of God.

The unfolding of the slow motion train crash. Called into the work of God.

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