

“WE WANT TO BE LIKE OUR NEIGHBOURS”

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Our reading comes from 1 Samuel 12: 13-25. Let me fill in some of the background. Earlier, in chapter 8, we read that when Samuel was old, the elders demanded a meeting with him in Ramah, a town of refuge in the south. They made it clear they wanted him to take a back seat.

“We want a king!” they shout.. What they don’t say is: “We want to be like our neighbours.” Samuel rebukes them. “What’s wrong with living God’s way?”

“Maybe,” they reply, “but look at the pleasures they enjoy.”

“Yes”, says Samuel, “but look at the fall-out. Their ways lead to enslavement and oppression.” **“We want a king!”**

Samuel doesn’t give an immediate answer, though it goes totally against what he believes to be God’s will for Israel. Instead of reacting from the gut and saying or doing something he may later regret, he seeks guidance from God (8: 6). To his dismay God tells him to give them their wish. Sometimes the only way we learn is when we’re allowed to have our way. We won’t listen to God; so God grants our desire.

“All right”, says Samuel. “Go home and I’ll ask the Lord what he thinks of your demands.” Then God arranges the secret meeting with Saul, and Samuel anoints him as the future king.

Now Samuel calls the people together at Mizpah, the site of a decisive victory in Samuel’s early days. It’s an intentional reminder to them of the way God gave them that victory over the Philistines on a plate – a thunderstorm, and the enemy fled. But they don’t get the message. Instead, the tribal leaders clamour to get a move on, and lots are cast to find who the Lord has chosen.

But surprise, surprise! The lot in this case falls on Saul, from the lowly tribe of Benjamin. Saul: tall and handsome; Saul, moody and self-indulgent. “Yes, anoint him, old man. This is our king.”

But the northern tribesmen sniff. “Hardly a distinguished family”, they say. “Samuel has screwed up.” They refuse to recognise Saul as king. But then he wins a notable battle against the Ammonites, and at last the people are willing to present a united front. They respond to Samuel’s summons to meet again, this time at Gilgal. Another shrewd choice – Gilgal had been a sacred site since the time when Joshua first crossed the Jordan and set foot on the soil of the Promised Land in this area.

What a man this Samuel is. By this time he could have been forgiven for telling them to go to hell, but he’s still hanging in. He presents Saul to the people. Which brings us to our reading.

¹³See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the Lord has set a king over you. ¹⁴If you will fear the LORD and serve him and heed his voice and not

rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well; ¹⁵but if you will not heed the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king.

Samuel, I don't think they're taking it on board. I can hear them thinking: "Same old stuff. It's the sort of thing an old prophet would be expected to say -- Boring." But Samuel continues.

¹⁶Now therefore take your stand and see this great thing that the LORD will do before your eyes. ¹⁷Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon the LORD, that he may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the LORD is great in demanding a king for yourselves." ¹⁸So Samuel called upon the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel.

Now they're listening. The coincidence is uncanny. What's more, their crops are in jeopardy. They're afraid, but it's not a godly fear. Give the old man what he wants, so long as we save our crops and he doesn't cancel the coronation.

¹⁹All the people said to Samuel, "Pray to the LORD your God for your servants, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves."

Crocodile tears! It's too late. Pour scorn on them, Samuel, and then turn your back on them and leave them to it. It's what they deserve. -- But what in fact does he say?

²⁰Then Samuel said to the people, "Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart; ²¹and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. ²²For the LORD will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself.

What a man! Note Samuel's attitude at what for him is a very humiliating moment. The people are saying: "Move on, old man." His response puts him in a very select line-up of Old Testament leaders, along with people like Moses, Nehemiah, and Esther. Do you see why I say this? See how Samuel is still prepared to say, on God's behalf, that they are chosen people and God will stay with them if they will only turn to him with all their heart. But that's not all Samuel has to say. He rises to a height of selflessness rarely seen in the Old Testament.

²²Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. ²⁴Only fear the LORD, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you. ²⁵But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king."

Look again at those extraordinary words: "Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way." Ponder that. Here's a leader heedless of his own reputation or even his own safety, so strong is his compassion for his foolish and disobedient people.

Does that bring echoes to your mind? Hear Moses saying: "Lord, if you won't forgive their sin, blot me out of your book" (Ex. 32: 31-32). "You wouldn't be the God I think you are." Bold, caring man! Hear Nehemiah saying: "I grieve for my people, we've been so foolish. Lord, help me approach the king." (Neh. 1: 1-11) Hear Esther saying: "I'll go in to the king, despite the law that prohibits it; and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4: 16).

What a select company: great leaders who in their willingness to risk all for the sake of their people faintly foreshadowed the willingness of our Lord Jesus himself to die for his people – us! Time and cultural change have not dimmed the qualities of leadership which Samuel exhibited; especially at this moment.

So much for exegesis. But exegesis without application is like an oasis without water. And I feel we have much to learn in our current situation from this example which the Lord sets before us. Consider 4 aspects of Samuel's godly leadership.

1. He was a true servant-leader.

First, Samuel was a true servant-leader. He'd spent a lifetime leading the people and hearing their complaints. Now, an old man, he's confronted by the fact that he must remit control to a personable but untried young man. Does he try to retain power, claim special privileges, patronise his successor?

Not at all. In the words of John the Baptist in a later age, he recognises that "I must decrease and he must increase." Samuel does what he can to prepare his successor for his new role. And then he steps back. Not quitting. Just stepping back. Servant-leadership has its own cross, which we bear for Christ's sake.

We have to be careful that the Alliance doesn't become a refuge of ageing complainers. My perception is that we're not getting our message across to a younger generation. We're not making enough effort to recruit and train younger evangelicals. In our youth work, we're tempted to pass on a gospel of entertainment rather than edification. Discipleship takes second place to mass instruction. Servant-leaders spend themselves for others, and are even able to concede power to the next generation.

2. He continued to care about what happened to them.

Second, Samuel continued to care about what happened to the people of God, even when they rejected his message and scorned his passion. He didn't take them to court for compensation, nor did he walk out on them. He hung in.

We live in an age of Christian pub-crawling. If I don't like the way they do things here, I'll go somewhere else, or strike out on my own. Sometimes the Spirit of God does lead us to step away from a situation that has become a deadlock. But always the questions to ask are: "What will happen to the believers we leave behind? Is it all their fault? Is there really nothing more I can do?"

Such considerations have kept me in the Uniting Church over the years despite increasing dissatisfaction with the quality of leadership at the top. There has always been something to do at the local church level. And paradoxically, it's becoming easier to do it. A couple of Assemblies ago, much was made of the **new** discovery that the life of the church is in the congregation. Surprises, surprise!

Meanwhile, things are weakening at the centre, and even Resolution 84 has facilitated the greater freedom of action of the local church, much as we deplore it on other grounds. I foresee wider doors of opportunity to interpret the mission of the local body of Christ in evangelical terms.

Samuel was one of those who persevere. By contrast, many of us have a natural tendency, when people we've known for years criticise us as hardliners, homophobes, and the like, to withdraw in hurt pride and distance ourselves from them. To continue cheerfully to serve them as well as we are able is the way of the Cross. And Samuel took it.

3. He continued to speak God's word to them.

That's why, thirdly, Samuel continued to speak God's word to them. As if he hadn't already told them a thousand times. It was too important to be silenced, even though he knew that many people would give it a cold reception.

There are ways of doing this, of course. Some pronounce the word of God as judgment, laying guilt on the people they're cross with. That often conceals a vengeful ego trip. Samuel comes across as maybe a bit inclined this way. A better model is presented by Paul, when he tempers his rather sharp criticisms of the Corinthians by saying: "We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections (2 Cor. 6: 11).

In some recent instances, members of the Reforming Alliance have been vilified by those who resent the stand we are taking. Some of our publications in response have been angry and thunderous. We must at all costs guard against demonising our opposition. They are human, and by and large most are sincere in what they believe. We'll win nobody over by questioning their integrity. When we do, the truly wicked rejoice, and the merely bewildered are repelled.

It's a bit like that regrettable tendency in much Australian sport these days to "play the man." Cricketers sledge the batsmen when the umpires are out of earshot. Footballers target the good players on the other team, and try to nobble them when the referee's not looking. In philosophy, it's called *argumentum ad hominem* –attacking the person rather than assessing the propositions he or she is putting forward. It's not just bad logic; it's unworthy Christian conduct. We must patiently set forth the Word and contend for the truth with grace.

4. He continued to pray for them.

Fourthly, Samuel continued to pray for them. When I said earlier that Samuel stepped back, that didn't mean he washed his hands of their affairs. He didn't say: "Well, I've done my bit. Now it's time to enjoy retirement and go on some world cruises." No. "I won't cease to pray for you", he said.

On a purely pragmatic level, if we do what Jesus told us to do, and pray for our enemies, it restores our sense of balance and seasons our words with respect for the other person. Which, incidentally, is likely to make more headway with the opposition anyway. On a spiritual level, it can sometimes have unexpected effects. Abraham Lincoln was once chided by one of his generals for not inflicting heavy reparations on the losers. He was actually preparing to provide subsidies for their rehabilitation. "Your job is to destroy our enemies, not rescue them", said the general. Lincoln replied: "Don't I destroy my enemies when I make them into my friends?"¹

Actually, I don't believe we have as many enemies as we think we have. Many bewildered people would like to come on board with us, but are offended by the stridency and even self-righteousness of some of our utterances. In the words of our Lord, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:43-44).

Conclusion

So Samuel speaks to us across the years, a devout man caught up in national politics. His concern for truth is matched only by his love for the straying people of God. When he sees his people wanting to be like their sinning neighbours, he keeps reminding them of their inheritance – the salvation story – telling of their historic dealings with a God who intervenes, and the lifestyle he expects of them. We're challenged to do the same, integrity matched by grace, for that is the way of the Cross. Samuel was the man he was because of the boy he was, when he first said to God "Here I am." It's a commitment we all need to renew continually.

So let us pray: O Lord God, our heavenly Father, glorious in your majesty; who has revealed your will and purpose to us through the coming of Christ our Saviour: Strengthen us by your Spirit to hold fast the truth; but restrain our tendency to self-righteousness. Protect us from accommodation to a culture which is under judgment; but deepen our compassion for those entrapped by sins. Convict our church leaders, including us, of any deviations from the path of the Cross, that we may be clean vessels for your use, and may draw many into the kingdom. This we ask in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Quoted in William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*. Edinburgh: St Andrew's Press, 3rd ed., 1956, 133.