

## Second Sunday after Trinity, Matins

1 Samuel 21:1-15. Luke 11:14-18

Mother Alice

One of the gifts of entering into our long season of 'ordinary time' in the Church calendar, is finding some space to dwell with characters in the Old Testament. Today, and for the next few Sundays, we have some parts of David's story, found in the first and second books of the prophet Samuel. The shape of the narrative in these books takes us through the rule of the last two judges, Eli and Samuel, through the reign of the first Kings – Saul, and then David. I absolutely love finding my way through Old Testament history, and all of these characters are quite remarkable, and teach us so much about what it means to be in relationship with God, what it means to be in leadership, what the relationship between leaders and their people and their God could, or should be. The Old Testament is a journey through the relationship between the people of Israel and their God, and the different people God uses to lead them, guide them, and when they time after time fall away from God, call them back, restore them to worship and right living. 1 Samuel is probably not the first book you might turn to when you read your Bible, but it is so incredibly rich, and beautiful and meaningful, and this morning I just want to take us through a little deep dive into this book exploring Samuel, Saul and David, up to the passage we had read for us from chapter 21.

So Samuel, was the son of Hannah, a long awaited son, and such was her gratitude for him that she offered him to the Lord, and he grew up ministering to Eli who was a priest and a judge, at a time where the people of Israel had fallen away, even Eli's own sons. Samuel had a powerful encounter with the Lord, and was given a prophecy which said that Eli's sons were going to be punished, and all Israel with them. And this prophecy was true, and in the battle with the Philistines that happened soon after, the ark of the covenant, was captured, and Eli's sons were killed, and then Eli himself dies, and there is a strong sense that God has completely rejected Israel.

But the ark of the covenant, the dwelling place of the Lord, begins to cause all kinds of trouble with the Philistines, and so they return it to Israel, and Samuel calls the people to repentance, calls them to return to the Lord and to re-establish worship and order. And so he is elected as the final Judge of Israel, and as he draws close to the end of his life, he asks his sons to be judges, but much like Eli's sons, they turn out to be unsuitable and unreliable. And so we have this continued cycle of the Lord raising up leaders, raising up prophets and judges and priests – and each time the people of Israel quickly fall away. And so the focus shifts, and in 1 Samuel 8 there is a meeting, in which the people of Israel demand a King, like their neighbours have. They think that having a King will be good. But the Lord speaks to Samuel and tells him to remind them just what the reality of having a King will be like. They will have to pay taxes, and tithe, and show obedience, and submit to the King's authority. But still the people insist they want a King, and so the Lord concedes and tells Samuel to appoint a King.

And Saul is chosen – he is a Benjaminite, and described as handsome and incredibly tall, and he comes to Samuel, and Samuel has been given a prophecy about him, and so knows he is the right man, and Samuel anoints Saul as King – and this is in chapter 10, the first anointing of a King to be ruler of the people of Israel. And Saul is given power and wisdom and insight, and there is a time of great rejoicing, and Samuel's last speech in chapter 12 seems to show that things are improving, that Israel is being more faithful in worship, that this Kingdom is finally enabling the people to show obedience to the Lord.

And then it all goes horribly wrong. Saul goes into battle against the Philistines, and it's not going well, and he's waiting for Samuel, but Samuel doesn't arrive, and so Saul is impatient and decides to bring the burnt offering without Samuel there – a sign of his lack of faith, a sign that he himself, when under pressure, cannot be obedient to the Lord's commands. And these battles against the Philistines continue, and Saul's son Jonathan also is involved, and the situation becomes worse and worse until Samuel tells Saul that the Lord regrets making him King, and Saul is broken by this news and confesses his sins, but the Lord tells Samuel that he is to anoint a new King, a Bethlehemite, a son of Jesse, and the Lord shows Samuel that this new King is to be David, the youngest of Jesse's sons.

So David is anointed King by Samuel, and David becomes known to Saul because he goes to him and plays his lyre to calm and soothe him, and David becomes close to his son Jonathan, and then the greatest battle is fought – against Goliath the Philistine, and the Lord appoints David to take on this mighty opponent. This is of course the most famous story known about David – that he comes with just his sling shot and a few smooth stones, not with the swords and spears and not with the armour of others – and because the Lord is on his side then Goliath is defeated, and David's fame rises across all Israel – much to Saul's distress and dismay. And Saul tries to kill David, and when he marries his daughter Michal, becomes a true enemy, so that David has to escape and flee.

And here we land at this morning's reading – where David has escaped, and he is being pursued, and he is hungry, and he reaches the priest Ahimelech and begs him to give him some of the bread of the presence, which he is not permitted to eat, and a sword – claiming that he is on an urgent errand for the King and didn't have time to get his belongings together. Except that this is a lie – David isn't with a group of people, he isn't on an errand for the King. He is alone, and afraid. His popularity from the killing of Goliath has only served to make his life complicated – he knows he Samuel has anointed him as King, but it isn't his time yet to step into this rightful role. His relationship with Saul, who still thinks he is the King, and Jonathan, and now Michal is very complex and there is jealousy, anger, resentment, not to mention genuine fear for his life after Saul has tried to kill him. But where we are right now, David's behaviour is not right – he is lying, he is stealing, he is pretending to be in control, and then pretending to be totally out of control – all as a way of saving himself. He can't see God in this mess – and so, like Saul and all the leaders before him – he just panics and does some foolish things. Can we blame him?

Well I think we can. And we do. We hold our leaders to such high account. It seems to matter to us to know all the ins and outs of their lives. It matters to us to know that there is integrity, that the private lives of those called to lead are a reflection of the outward lives that we see. We are curious and nosy, and also so quick to judge and to condemn, and to demand better, new leadership. The lives of these Old Testament leaders are turbulent lives – and not so far removed from political dramas in our own times.

But what matters in the lives of these leaders and the people they serve is actually their relationship with God. Is this leader faithfully serving – i.e. serving with faith. Trusting in God. Receiving his love, making this known. Showing the people that they are loved, that God is with them, that he is leading and guiding them, that he wants to show them the way to live so that they and their children and their children's children will be well, and flourish and be blessed, and live in peace and unity and love. And David, and Saul – they do this, by showing that living by faith is not easy. That mistakes will be made. That even leaders anointed by God will have dark times of doubt, of sin, of utter utter failure. This particular incident with David unlawfully eating the bread of the presence is quoted by Jesus in the most extraordinary way – full of compassion and mercy – when he says that the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath. Jesus does not condemn what David did – he sees his heart, his fear, his circumstance – and effectively says 'what you did is ok – God is bigger than all of that'.

We cannot make judgements based on snapshots of lives. Lives are complex and messy. Those in the limelight often have seasons of popularity and then fall from grace – and yet in Scripture we often see the difference that faith in God makes. That even when people give up on us, God does not. We see littered through Scripture stories of our failures and of God's redemption. What matters is not what we have done, but how our hearts are growing, how we understand the impact of our sins, how we seek to be forgiven, to be reconciled, to allow ourselves to be loved again by God. This is the difference that faith makes, that we are allowed, even our leaders are allowed, to make mistakes, knowing that through our weaknesses and failure it is God's strength that grows within us, transforming our frailty.

It is thought that David wrote Psalm 42 around this time of fear, of fleeing from Saul – of uncertainty of the future. How many today would join with David in their own season of fear and uncertainty. Why are you so downcast O my soul, and why are you so disquieted within me? O put your trust in God, for I will yet give him thanks, who is the help of my countenance, and my God.

Amen