

Scripture Reading for June 6 2021

1 Sam 8:4-11, 13-20 (NIV)

8 When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders. ² The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. ³ But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

⁴ So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵ They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." ⁶ But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. ⁸ As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights."

¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will *take* your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots.¹ ¹³ He will *take* your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will *take* the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵ He will *take* a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants.

¹⁶ Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will *take* for his own use.

¹⁷ He will *take* a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. ²⁰ Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."

²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. ²² The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."

Then Samuel said to the Israelites, "Everyone go back to your own town."

¹ v12 is omitted for simplicity.

SERMON: “Role Models and Leaders”

Last weekend, Chelsea won the European Champions League. Just before that however, they lost to Leicester in the F.A. Cup final. And, perhaps predictably, Manchester City won the English Premier League this year. Understandably, this is a time for celebration of team successes. But the end of the soccer season is also a time when, rightly or wrongly, soccer managers are fired for not living up to expectations of the teams’ owners and fans. Loss of confidence in leadership is obviously a feature of politics too, resulting in leadership challenges within a political party or, come election time, the ousting of a Mayor, an MP, a Premier, or a Prime Minister. Leadership and leadership succession is very important in companies and institutions of all kinds, giving rise to boardroom battles and the clash between personal ambition with the organizations’ overall performance and goals. This is also consequential in family-owned businesses and high-profile religious institutions that follow a family dynastic model. Will the children have the leadership abilities and motivation to live up to the expectations of their aging parents? Leadership is, then, a critical issue everywhere, including the church. Today’s text is about this topic in what was a defining moment in Israel’s history.

In order to make sense of the story of Samuel and Saul, we need to appreciate its context. The books of 1st and 2nd Samuel took their final form during - or just after - the Babylonian exile, some 400 years *after* the events portrayed in today’s reading. Scholars think the same author, or group of authors, also compiled the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Kings. In those days when people wrote history, it was not in the detached way that we might expect today. Rather, the author is a storyteller *interpreting* history with a clear purpose or agenda in mind. For example, one question that would have been in the minds of the exiled Jewish people was: “*How did we get into this mess?*” The author writes history to address that question, along with many others.

So, what events led up to the crisis in today’s scripture reading? Well, the Philistines were a formidable enemy with *iron* tools and holding a virtual monopoly on the local iron trade. Israel only had flint and soft copper, which was a huge military disadvantage. Although Israel had other enemies, none compared with the mighty Philistines.² Earlier in chapter 4 we read of a major Philistine victory where they also captured the Ark of the Covenant, which symbolized God’s presence amongst Israel. In one swift stroke the Israelites sustained both a military collapse and spiritual demoralization. It was a low point in the young nation’s history.³ Along comes Samuel to lead the people as their priest, prophet, and judge. It turns out that the Ark was nothing but trouble to the Philistines, so they returned it to the Israel.⁴ The Israelites then repented⁵ and, with Samuel as their leader, God gave them victory over the Philistines. By the end of chapter 7 the Israelites were enjoying a time of peace.

² Not only did Samson combat against the Philistines, but so did David against the famed Goliath.

³ 1 Sam 4:22.

⁴ See 1 Sam 5 & 6.

⁵ 1 Sam 7:3-6.

In chapter 8 everything suddenly changes; Samuel had become an old man.⁶ He was still in charge, but his sons also had a role and they were dishonest failures. While Samuel administered justice, his sons perverted justice. So a key implied leadership succession question was simply this: “Where will *justice* come from when Samuel dies?” And, “Who ensure our *security* and who will fight our battles?”

The legitimate indictment against Samuel’s sons was not from the wider public, but from the tribal rulers. These elders were typically the political old guard of Israel, yet they *uncharacteristically* wanted a *new* mode of power. They saw the establishment of a uniting monarchy as their only hope of collective survival in the face of external opposition. The elders recognized that *the old system was not working* and wanted a *radical departure in social organization*. So, what was that old system they were rejecting? We learn about it in the book of Judges. *God* himself chose those non-hereditary leaders, like Deborah, Gideon, and Samson, to deliver the chosen people from a particular oppressor in response to the people’s cry of help to God. This reminds us of the story of God calling Moses to deliver the oppressed Israelites from the cruel Egyptian Pharaoh. However, the story of the Judges is one of a steady, downward spiral into moral and spiritual decay. They were increasingly flawed leaders, with Samson being one of the worst. The people also persisted in neglecting their covenant with God and, instead, worshiped other local gods and assimilated the cultural practices of their neighbors. Samuel was the last of these judges. Even so, the author of 1 Samuel wanted his contemporary readers to recognize that the elder’s request for a king was an *extraordinary* proposal, because God’s chosen people were *not* to be like the other nations, for God himself was their King! This dramatic confrontation between the elders and Samuel was a proposition to abandon their self-understanding as an exodus-people. Samuel recognizes the implications of the request and is very displeased. And, as usual, he prays to God for insight.

God’s response is extremely surprising! God immediately gives in to the request of the people for a king. God comforts Samuel by saying that the people’s request is really a rejection of himself as their King, and *not* a personal rejection of Samuel. God seems to be willing to let his covenant partners take their own risks, even when God believes that choice to be unwise. Even so, monarchy proceeds under a cloud of theological resistance, as demonstrated by Samuel’s warning – which we heard today and is one of the most extensive criticisms of the monarchy in the Old Testament. “The people want justice? Then tell them,” says God, “the *kind* of justice they can expect from the king who *takes, takes, and takes*, whether by taxation, confiscation, or the draft.” Samuel’s speech is a catalog of royal abuse of power, and many scholars have suggested that it may be a critique of Solomon’s excesses. But a king’s excessive “taking” from their subjects was the practice of the neighboring Canaanite monarchs too. The speech ends in verses 17 and 18 with the stark warning: “...and you shall be the king’s *slaves*. And in that day, you will cry out because of your king, *whom you have chosen for yourselves*; but the Lord will not answer you *in that day*.”⁷ Enslavement is presented as a kingly right and intrinsic to the institution

⁶ The contrast between chapters 7 and 8 is stark. In chapter 7 we are told, in effect, that kingship was *not* needed because God had given Samuel victory over their enemies.

⁷ There is, *perhaps*, a later contrast between Samuel’s choice of Saul (1 Sam 8:22) and God’s choice of David (1 Sam 16:1).

of the monarchy.⁸ This message should have been a very powerful warning for a nation whose roots were in Egypt, requiring the exodus from slavery. Recall too that the author's readers *were now* slaves in Babylon, who were hoping against hope for a new Moses and a second exodus back to whatever was left their ruined homeland. The author attributes *this* episode as a key factor to explain the exile question: "How did we get into this mess"? Israel was warned – says the writer - that in the future when the nation cries out, God will *not* answer. In the guise of seeking justice, and in the face of feared enemies, the people *rejected God's covenant and leadership*, desirous instead to conform to the world's style of governance.⁹ The elders did not discern that the monarchy was in principle dangerous, they simply wanted to be like the other nations. They responded according to their *hearts* not their *heads*. (I leave you to make parallels with political power plays today! So, what happens next?)

God then told Samuel to anoint the tall and handsome Saul to lead the people.¹⁰ Even before he was made king, Saul led the Israelites to a great victory against another neighbor, the war-mongering Ammonites, satisfying the military leadership expectations of the people. Being a victorious warrior made Saul a *popular* leader, as well as being God's anointed one. After the coronation, Samuel addresses the people and further warns them *not* to stop worshipping God now that they have a king like all the other nations.¹¹ But in the very next chapter Saul fails God, and so another downward spiral begins. The author portrays Saul's story as an example of the promises and failures of kingship. It's a sad tale, beginning with brilliance, but then diminishing towards murkiness. Before long, even God "regrets" having chosen Saul!¹² The author's historical journey continues in these books, but a key message is this: *You placed too much trust in your king – or leader - and not enough in God.*

This is a sobering and challenging story for the Church today. Let's consider some aspects of that.

First, how to balance secular power and influence with our faith is problematic and not easily resolved.¹³ Our reading doesn't settle the issue and we so must, as a community of faith, be self-aware and mindful of our relationship with the state, political parties, and other organizations that seek our *allegiance*. At what point do our loyalties to human institutions and the law of the land need to give way to our higher loyalty towards God? Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Desmond Tutu all faced these very real questions and challenges. Being followers of Jesus is difficult in every age and the yearning for conformity to the surrounding culture is seductive - for who likes to be radically different from our neighbors? Yet, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, the church is called to be "*in* the world, but

⁸ Many see that today with a government's taxation policy!

⁹ But the dire warning of Samuel didn't matter; the people's yearning for monarchy was driven by a powerful fear and a hunger for security.

¹⁰ In light of [4], there is some tension, I think, between 1 Sam 8:22 and 9:15-17.

¹¹ See 1 Sam 12:12-25.

¹² 1 Sam 15:11,35.

¹³ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/God-and-Money.pdf> .

not of the world.”¹⁴ This is not an easy calling, because the culture in which we live has values that can be different from those of God. In the contemporary church’s desire to be “relevant” to the world, we need to guard against compromising our core identity, message, and activities just for the sake of the latest fashion. In the language of Jesus, we will cease to be salty and become worthless.¹⁵

Second, the text invites reflection on the nature of the world-wide Church, national denominations, and local congregations, raising challenging questions about power, influence, security, together with self-awareness concerning our own internal leadership models. Different denominations have different leadership structures. The Roman Catholics have their bishops, cardinals, and the pope; the Anglicans are similarly hierarchal. Congregationalists are much-less centralized and power lies in the whims of a local congregation who can, if they so wish, unilaterally fire their minister. The Presbyterian Church is a hybrid of those two structures. Church elders have a great deal of power and influence in their leadership role. And while ministers respect and moderate their Sessions, they are ultimately accountable to their local Presbytery. It’s also important to remember that, from the Presbytery level right up to the national General Assembly, elders and ministers are *equally* balanced in numbers in their voting and decision making. I am reminding you of this because our annual General Assembly begins today. I hasten to add that *no* denominational governance system is perfect and, curiously, *all* claim the Bible as justifying their own particular model! Nevertheless, even as we Presbyterians collectively seek to discern the Spirit’s guidance on any given matter, the decisions that General Assembly make are always consequential. Therefore, pray for GA today and in the coming week. Regardless of the depth of feeling on complex issues, or the merits and drawbacks of various governance systems, we have to ask ourselves this: Is the church *only* committed to devise modes of power that secures *its own* existence and life? Or is the church participating in a precarious faith adventure with Jesus Christ at the helm? If it’s tainted by the former, the church has sadly misunderstood its mission. If it’s the latter, we are to be reminded that this is a journey of *faith* – *not* certainty – and while the collective process of wise discernment is vital, we must also *trust in* the Holy Spirit who has been given to the *whole* church.¹⁶

Third, the story also reminds us to be careful of idolizing our spiritual heroes or gurus; they may disappoint us, just like Saul.¹⁷ I will mention just a few names here: Jean Vanier, Ravi Zacharias, Bill Hybels; there are many more - including the moral failings of Martin Luther King, Jr. Whatever good

¹⁴ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Jesus-Prayed-for-Us.pdf> .

¹⁵ See Matt 5:13.

¹⁶ And not just a few enlightened individuals (or particular denominations). More generally, the Spirit is given to the world-wide Church and not just one local congregation. Church history is littered with disunity, factions, and splits. It has, thank God, also had its reformers. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is not exclusive to the church, but always goes ahead of *God’s* mission.

¹⁷ And many other biblical characters, like David, etc. That raises the important theological question on why God later regretted choosing Saul! (Did God know the future?) That’s a topic for another time . . . Incidentally, Saul – though tall, handsome and warrior, was from the least clan of Israel (a Benjaminite; 1 Sam 9:21.) Gideon and David also considered their humble origins as precluding them from potential greatness; see Judges 6:15; 1 Sam 16:7 (David was the youngest son.)

these people did does *not* excuse or condone their abuse and failures.¹⁸ Worse, since they *claimed* to be acting in God's name, their inauthenticity undermines God's reputation in the world and likely does much more harm than good. That should make us all reflect on what we *look* for in a leader? And considering that question makes us reflect on what *we* ourselves truly *value*.¹⁹ I hope is that *integrity* is high on the list, along with many other positive qualities. The story of Saul warns us to be cautious of appearances - of popular, tall, and handsome men - with feet of clay!²⁰

In conclusion, we don't have the choice to change our *style* of government. And our church polity is also a system of governance developed over centuries and which constrains change. Yet in both cases, we have a voice if we become activists and when we vote. And when we choose, we are to be mindful which master we are serving. Are our decisions based on what we humbly and prayerfully think are *God's* priorities, or are they focused on our own desires?²¹ Let's therefore recall the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount when he said: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other."²² This saying reminds us to think carefully of *our* priorities and where *we* place our ultimate security - and that today is often understood in financial terms. It is perfectly normal to desire security and stability, just as the people in today's story wanted. But let us remember that since God is *with* us²³ and *for* us, there is ultimately nothing to fear in the many changes and challenges of life.²⁴ Consequently, since God has demonstrated that he is faithfully committed to us, let us be faithfully committed to him. AMEN. Let us pray.

¹⁸ In most cases, their flaws emerged over time; people rarely follow or adulate a known 'sinner' – but it happens!

¹⁹ We also must be *fully aware* of what we *desire* in a leader and what we *need* – the two may be *very* different. God will go along with our choice, because he has given free-will, but may it be one that delights God's heart . . .

²⁰ Sadly, the failings of leaders often only emerge over time. Good leadership in times of crisis is obviously invaluable. (The story of Saul is also to be seen in the context of the increasingly flawed leaders of Judges.)

²¹ Or some other idol.

²² Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13. Jesus went on to say: "You cannot serve both God and money."

²³ "God with us" was also God's message to a fearful Gideon; Judges 6:12,16.

²⁴ See: <https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/The-Trinitarian-God-is-for-Us.pdf> .