

In the Hebrew Scriptures the history books - Samuel, Kings and Chronicles - have a difficult time with the idea of Kingship. It is not because of the bad ones: the kings who manifestly disobey the commands of God from start to finish. It's also the ones you would think we should admire, and hold up as examples. Of course even they do some stupid things. People do. But the histories of Israel are more worried than that. Taken as a whole they advise us to regard the whole institution of monarchy with great caution.

This stretches right back to the people's demand for a king in the first place. Samuel has combined the roles of prophet and judge, but the people have no faith in those who will follow him. They look around at other nations, just as our politicians do today when looking for a model of some social policy: 'they do it better in Sweden'; 'this is what works in Germany'. The people look at the strong nations around, for Israel has ever been under threat from its neighbours. And they see that kingship seems to work. 'Give us one of them', they demand of Samuel.

Samuel does, but gives them a health warning. The King will make you subservient. The King will demand everything of you, he says. 'In that day you will cry out because of your King' is his prophecy, in 1 Samuel 8. 18. Their reply? 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we might be like other nations...' (1 Sam 8. 19, 20). And they get their wish. Saul, who is something of a disaster, then David, who builds up the country and enlarges its borders, and Solomon, who establishes it, fortifying Jerusalem even more, holding court there so that world leaders come knocking, and founding the temple, to show the impregnable power of the relationship between God, King, nation and people.

A wise reading of history is often able to show that the seeds of destruction are to be found at the moment of what looks like complete success. A reliance on what has got you to the point of achievement, simply looking for more of the same, will lead to the whole edifice crumbling. That's as true of the Roman Empire as of the financial markets in 2007 as it is of the England cricketers who won the Ashes in 2005 and fell away soon after. The Books of Kings, especially, describe just such a fall, and attribute it not just to bad leadership, but to the very model of kingship itself.

Solomon, the wise, the all powerful, the sought after one, is not immune from finding security in transient alliances rather than the complete dependence on God which is the hallmark of Israel. Kingship makes you do that. Power concentrated in the hands of one person, to whom others fawn, eventually corrupts. And with few checks and balances that power turns in on itself. It was already happening at the end of Solomon's reign, and not even the strong words of the prophet Ahijah about the breaking up of the twelve tribes of Israel can stop the process.

Our first reading tonight carries on the story. Solomon has died. Rehoboam, his son and anointed successor, trusts in the wrong sort of exercise of authority. Absolute kingship, he feels, can best be demonstrated by showing people who is boss. Is that not what a King is? Wise heads invite him to exercise his authority with humility and restraint, but kingship lends itself more easily to a display of power than of humility. He would rather be ruler than servant. He would look weak otherwise. Ten of the tribes tell him what he can do with it, and so begins the split of the nation, into two Kingdoms. A couple of hundred years and

it's all gone, the nation overrun, the leaders in exile. And we can safely say that the split, the destruction, has been there all along.

My former boss used to say that 'any system can be made not to work'. The Judges and the early prophets had their troubles too. But reliance on an overt exercise of power - 'someone who will go out before us and fight our battles', as the people say to Samuel when they ask for a King - this reliance has perhaps more chance of failure than any other. The people put a figurehead and a system in between them and their joint responsibility for the land and nation and people. Their abdication of power leads to it being exercised badly, however hard the King in question tries.

In that same land today different models of leadership and power currently clash, and people die. In our own land the people with power seem increasingly remote for the people they govern, or should that be 'serve'? We do well to be suspicious of the exercise of power. We do well also to pray for those who have it, and hold up before them the model of the one who, with all authority on heaven and earth, sought out the weak, sat with the needy, shared the life of the poor, and gave up every shred of what he had, that we might live. Amen.