

The Eighth Candidate

A sermon given on the Third Sunday after Trinity, 16th June 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Now, I'm told that in a couple of weeks, there's going to be some kind of an election and on Tuesday night, we're going to be hosting an election hustings here in the Minster. Those who are hoping to represent us in Parliament will come and set out their proposals, and we'll have the opportunity to ask them questions about what they hope to be able to do. At times like this, clergy get rather nervous because on the one hand, God is not the servant of politics and we have to be very careful not to give the impression that God can simply be wheeled on to give his backing to this or that party or this or that policy. On the other hand, we also have to be careful not to give the impression that God is uninterested in all of that - we are called to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God, and that is meant to be a Kingdom of peace and justice and righteousness; Christians should be very keen to see how the Kingdom envisaged and promoted by our politicians conforms to the Kingdom of God: Do the policies on offer tend to bring people together, or do they tend to divide? Do they tend to support the marginalised and the vulnerable, or do they scapegoat them or ignore them? Do they express compassion or suspicion? And so on.

The other week, somebody on the Alpha course asked me, "Why does the church always get involved in politics?" My answer was simply to say, "Because Jesus commanded us to love our neighbour and you can't love your neighbour without making political decisions, not least in deciding who my neighbour is in the first place." These are questions for us, not just as individuals, but as churches and as a society. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was once asked why the church got involved in politics, and his response was to ask, "Which Bible are you reading?" - because in his view the teachings of the Bible have profoundly political consequences and we have an instance of that in our first reading here this morning from the first Book of Samuel.

Here we see a man of God, the Prophet Samuel, embracing a policy of what can only be called 'regime change.' The story opens by saying that the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel (it sounds as though even God finds politics unpredictable sometimes) because things don't always turn out the way they should. God says, "*I have rejected Saul from being king over of Israel*" and God sends Samuel on a mission to find a new king. This is a story about an election, only it's not the people doing the electing, it's God. Samuel here is embarking upon a very dangerous mission because there isn't actually a vacancy for the role of king - Saul is still king - and if you want to start lining up new kings when the old one is still around, you'd better watch out. The elders of Bethlehem realise that Samuel is playing a dangerous game because Saul's base, his power base, is in the north of Israel. But Bethlehem, where Samuel is visiting, is in the south. So when the elders of Bethlehem see Samuel, who is meant to be the king's man, a representative of the royal court, they're naturally wondering what Samuel is doing so far south, so far off his own patch. And so the text says, "*They came to meet him, trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?"*" They're worried either that Samuel is on some foraging expedition on behalf of the king to conscript their young men into the army or to raise taxes, or they're worried that Samuel has some agenda of his own that might upset Saul and implicate them - so either way, they're right to be nervous.

Samuel has in fact come to anoint a new king - and this is a deeply political story.

There are many stories in the Old Testament of kings being challenged by the prophets. The question is, what qualities do you look for in a new king? Jesse's eldest son Eliab is brought before Samuel who thinks, *'Surely this is the man'* - Eliab is an impressive-looking figure. But God says, *'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.'*

I wonder, what are you looking for in your candidates for the general election? God isn't taken in by the PR or the spin - He sees through the photo opportunities and the sound bites, the desperate manifesto promises and the breakfast-time interviews. When you step back and look at them, it's striking how superficial this current election campaign is: there's no attempt to hold a serious discussion, helping us to make wise decisions; instead, there is just a relentless, exhausting appeal to our own self-interest.

But the Lord looks not on the outward appearance, but on the heart. When the seven sons of Jesse pass before Samuel, his conclusion is, *'The Lord has not chosen any of these.'* - you could take that as my text for this morning: 'The Lord has not chosen any of these.' Seven is the biblical number of completion: it's the number of perfection. When the seven sons of Jesse are ruled out, even though from a human point of view, they seem impressive and plausible, it looks as though Samuel has run out of options, and I take that as a warning not to put our faith entirely in political solutions or political parties or political ideologies. But in the story, it turns out there is an eighth son. - there's a spare, David, who has all this time been off stage - it seems that with God, there is always an alternative; there is always a new dimension waiting to be opened up.

And so in this election coming up where each of us has a vote, what I want to say is take it seriously. We need a representative in Parliament to help frame our laws and shape our national policy and we need to play our part in that decision, prayerfully and wisely, to choose someone who can take us closer to the Kingdom of God and not further away from it. But at the back of your mind, remember Samuel's words, *"The Lord has not chosen any of these."* So don't put your faith unreservedly in any of the candidates, because in the end they will only disappoint. In the end, the Kingdom of Christ is a Kingdom not of this world and that doesn't mean that politics is irrelevant, it simply means that it is not ultimate. Be careful not to define yourself as Conservative or Labour or Lib Dem or any of those tribes - you and we are bigger than that. Be careful not to pin all your hopes on the kingdom of this world - whatever your flavour of politics, it won't change human nature.

Whoever you plan to vote for, remember that in the end we all stand in need of an eighth candidate - the equivalent of the eighth son of Jesse, one whom the world dismisses because he had no form or Majesty that we should look at him; nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. Yet this is the candidate who can save us at the point of our deepest need, because he is a man like David after God's own heart. The eighth son of Jesse is like the Son of God, opening up a transcendent possibility of justice and grace, and so inspiring each of us to love our neighbour more.

So as you make your choice on July the fourth, remember the one who is like an eighth candidate; who judges not superficially but according to the heart; the one who came to establish God's reign of peace and mercy; not the one whom you choose, but the one who chooses you; the one whose name can always be found next to a cross.

Reading Text

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

15:34 Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. 35 Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

16:1 The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' 2 Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord ." 3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' 4 Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' 5 He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord ; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord 's anointed is now before the Lord .' 7 But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' 9 Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' 10 Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen any of these.' 11 Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' 12 He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.