

The King

A Sermon on Deuteronomy 17:14-20

Series: Words of Life – Deuteronomy

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Texts: Deuteronomy 17:14-20; 1 Samuel 8

In Paul's First Letter to Timothy, Paul urges his apprentice to pray for 'kings and all those in authority.' This one of those commands in the Bible that, to my shame, I had never taken particularly seriously—until last year! Last year I began to pray for politicians in earnest. Never had I felt such sympathy for politicians and their advisers. Wrenched from my usual lack of interest in politics and easy cynicism, I found myself engaging far more deeply in dilemmas of my leaders, and conscious of the sheer energy it must require to keep fronting up to job where no decision you make comes without a cost of some kind.

That leaders stir powerful and conflicting emotions in the people they lead is, of course, nothing new. Leaders inspire in us extremes running all the way from adulation on the one hand to hatred and contempt on the other. What people *may* find surprising, however, is just how powerfully these emotions make their presence felt in the Bible. The Bible's view of human leadership, and, let's add immediately, of people's attitudes towards their leaders, is remarkably nuanced. In the first part of this sermon, therefore, I want to look at the Old Testament's famously ambivalent attitude towards kingship as a political institution in Ancient Israel. In Part Two, we'll then turn to look kingship as an institution provided for in the Book of Deuteronomy. Then in Part Three we'll be looking at kingship as an office both fulfilled and transformed by Jesus. In each part of the sermon we'll try to retain a dual focus. On the one hand I'll be asking the question: What is God's vision for good human leadership? And on the other, I'll be asking: What do our aspirations for and anxieties about our human leaders reveal about us? Let's dive in!—

PART ONE

Kingship in Israel

As I said earlier, the Bible's attitude towards Israel's kings is profoundly ambivalent. One would expect the Bible to assess the reigns of different kings differently, and this is of course the case, but the ambivalence of the Bible extends further to what we might call kingship as an institution in Israel's life, above and beyond the assessment of individual Israelite kings.

On the one hand, it's possible to find ringing endorsement of the king as a key aspect of God's good provision for his people. Consider, for example, this verse from the Book of Proverbs:

When a king sits on his throne to judge,
He winnows out all evil with his eyes (20:8).

Here the king is God's agent in dispensing earthly justice, making a distinction between the innocent and guilty much as a farmer might separate out the wheat from the chaff. Even more emphatic is the following verse:

The lips of a king speak as an oracle,
And his mouth does not betray justice (16:10)

The context for this proverb, too, seems to be the king's role as judge. Behind the earthly king stands all the authority of God: when the king delivers his verdict it is like a prophet delivering an oracle.

In other parts of the Bible, Israel's lack of a king is identified as the reason for the political fragmentation, violence and spiritual drift the nation experiences. Reappearing at several junctures in the Book of Judges is the biblical writer's judgement that 'In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as he saw fit,' the implication being that it's the lack of a king that underlies and aggravates Israel's various problems.

Running alongside this positive assessment of kingship in Israel is a much bleaker narrative, deeply suspicious about the value of kings and anxious about the threat they pose to the rights of individuals, particularly small landholders. Take this story, for example, again from the Book of Judges. It's a parable told by a man named Jotham in response to the people's intention to crown his fratricidal brother, Abimelek, king. Jotham says,

One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Be our king.'

But the olive tree answered, 'Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honoured, to hold sway over the trees?'

Next the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come and be our king.'

But the fig tree replied, 'Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?'

Then the trees said to the vine, 'Come and be our king.'

But the vine answered, 'Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and humans, to hold sway over the trees?'

Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, 'Come and be our king.'

The thornbush said to the trees, 'If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!' (Judges 9: 8-15)

In this parable, Jotham paints a picture of kingship that he expects will strike a chord among those who hear it. According to Jotham, anyone fulfilling a genuinely useful role in society should have too much respect for themselves to leave off the respectable work they're engaged in to take up the dubious task of ruling. Kings tend to promise more than they can deliver (How much shade can a thornbush deliver, anyway?), and they're also prone to self-destructive explosions of anger, lighting fires that tend to consume the very people they're sworn to protect.

The classic passage warning against the dangers of kings is, of course, 1 Samuel 8, the passage we had read for us earlier this morning. The passage is richly ironic, of course, generated at least in part by Samuel's pique at the Israelites' dismay at his decision to appoint his own corrupt sons to succeed him. Samuel paints a devastating portrait of what having a king will be like for the Israelites: a king will conscript their sons into his army; swallow up their land; tax and requisition the produce of their land, and finally enslave his own people. Worst of all, in demanding a human king to reign over them, God's people are implicitly rejecting God as their king.

And so the picture of kingship as it emerges from the pages of the Old Testament is remarkably nuanced. At their best, then, kings in the Old Testament can function as God's servants to execute justice on behalf of the oppressed. But kings have an innate tendency to degenerate into tyrants, savaging their subjects like wolves let loose in a sheepfold. Perhaps even more bleakly, the Old Testament sees in our desire for strong leaders a self-destructive urge to place ourselves at the mercy of an individual whose own interests are inherently inimical to our own. Time and again, men and women have anointed as their leaders the very people most likely to oppress them. So how does Deuteronomy 17 fit into this larger picture?

PART TWO

Kingship in Deuteronomy 17

Even at a cursory glance, it's plain that the legislation concerning kings in Deuteronomy 17 has much more in common with 1 Samuel 8 than it does with more positive assessments of kingship as found, for example, in the Book of Proverbs. Kingship in Deuteronomy 17 feels very much like a concession that's being made to Israel's desire to ape the nations that surround her, a concession that's then hedged round with so many qualifications it's arguable that what's left bears relatively little resemblance to kingship as it was practiced in the Ancient Near East. No harem? No expenditure on costly military hardware? What sort of a king is this?!

Notice, too, how emphatically the office of the king is subordinated to the rule of law. Moses paints a picture of a ruler-scribe, copying out the words of the Deuteronomic law on his accession to the throne, and reading it diligently for the duration of his reign. Part of me, I confess, finds it somewhat shocking that a former French president can be gaoled for overspending on an election campaign, or a NSW premier can resign, having fast-tracked approval for government spending on a sports complex, and yet there's something clearly biblical about the principle involved in both instances: no one should be above the law.

Underlying Moses' stipulations lies a bleak assessment of human nature. Moses expects the Israelites to devalue their unique privilege of having God as their king in their desire to look just the same as everyone else. He expects them to want to return to Egypt: to return to the state of slavery from which they've just emerged. He expects them to abandon their freedom, to raise up for themselves a new pharaoh.

‘Is that what human beings are really like?’ you may want to ask at this point. ‘Must we really fall so unresistingly a prey to our most self-destructive urges? Is freedom really so unbearable? And what about our leaders? Is it only through lack of ability and staying-power that most of them fail to turn themselves into demagogues?’

PART THREE

Jesus the King

Brief though it is, I think you’ll agree that the seven verses of Deuteronomy we’ve been considering this morning raise far-reaching and deeply unsettling questions about human nature, particularly as that nature is illustrated by human leaders and our own attitudes towards the leaders we follow. Kingship came to Israel relatively late. But when it did, Israel’s kings bore out many of the dangers that Moses’ laws were trying to forestall. Think of Solomon, and his many wives, and the foreign gods whose worship they introduced into Israel. Think of the heavy taxation he imposed on his people and the forced labour he used in his many building projects. Think of the personal wealth he accumulated. And Solomon is one of Israel’s better kings!

Jesus is the king who provides the kind of leadership which Moses stipulates in Deuteronomy 17, and who shows us a form of kingship that contrasts sharply with the pattern of self-serving, self-regarding leadership that even our best politicians can find themselves falling into. Jesus is the king who impoverishes himself to make his servants rich. Jesus is the king who dies a slave’s death to set free a people enslaved to sin. Jesus is the king who does exactly what his Father tells him to do, who carries out his will perfectly, who sets his face to Jerusalem, turning away neither to the right nor to the left. Jesus is the king who reigns from the Father’s right hand, and whose reign will continue long after all earthly rulers have ceased to be remembered. Most importantly, Jesus is the king whose kingship will never detract from God’s because Jesus—is God.

And what of us? Plainly, the kind of self-destructive urges the Israelites experienced, in which they sought to escape from the responsibility God had called them to by redeeming them from their slavery in Egypt finds many a parallel among us. All of us are tempted more or less constantly to trade in the freedom we have as God’s children for various forms of slavery, be it an addiction, or a character flaw of ours which we refuse to confront, or the pursuit of wealth or pleasure. But, as Paul reminded his converts in Galatia, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free! (Galatians 5:1) God is not content with sullen slaves: he is determined to have free sons and

daughters. Many people worry that if they commit their lives to following Jesus, he'll take away all their freedoms and they'll experience the rest of their lives as a form of humdrum drudgery. Actually, the opposite is the case. If you commit your life to following Jesus, you'll find yourself cut off from blindly following after whatever it is that the surrounding nations have got and instead you'll begin to swim against the current. Becoming and being a Christian resembles not so much sinking down into a blissful cocoon of semi-consciousness as it does diving into the Tasman Sea and picking your way through forests of kelp and hearing the surf pound in your ears. Jesus came to set the prisoner free; to cancel sin's power over us. Jesus is our Redeemer, our God and King. Let's sing to him now.