

A faithful priest - 1 Samuel 2:12-4:1a

Date: 30 April 2023, 3rd Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Seeking a King

Texts: 1 Samuel 2:12-4:1a

In May 2020, amidst the COVID pandemic, well known Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias died. The good and great attended his funeral. US Vice President Mike Pence was one of the speakers. In the months after his death, allegations started to come out that he abused massage therapists that he had frequently visited. A months long investigation found that he had used his position and reputation to solicit sexual favours from massage therapists. One of his victims said, "When you go through something traumatic, it affects your mind, it affects your body, it affects your relationships, it affects your spirit." When I was at uni I used to listen to Ravi's talks. I read a bunch of his books. I looked up to him as a great evangelist and defender of the Christian faith. I was upset, disappointed, and angry. Ravi is one of a recent rash of high-profile Christian leaders to have been exposed for using their position of spiritual leadership to take advantage of others. We know this only too well in the history of the Anglican church in Tasmania. The abuse of spiritual authority has a huge impact, first and foremost upon the victims themselves, but also in the communities those leaders should have been serving.

Our text today shows us that sadly, this is nothing new, as we meet Hophni and Phineas, the sons of Eli the priest, who have taken over their dad's job and are using it for their ends. I mentioned the moral and political chaos that forms the backdrop to the book of Samuel. Well today we get to see just a little of what that looked like. In our text today we'll see just how seriously God takes the abuse of spiritual authority. We'll also see something of the challenges of parenting. And we'll see that in the face of human failures God has provided a faithful priest to provide the spiritual leadership we all need. As we go through chapters 2 and 3 of 1 Samuel, we'll see a contrast between the house of Eli and Samuel, and how God is at work to provide the spiritual leadership Israel needs. We'll look at 3 points:

- **Who will intercede? vv12-16**
- **A faithful priest, vv27-36**
- **And The Lord reveals himself, in chapter 3.**

Who will intercede? 12-26

Last week we left the boy Samuel serving before the Lord under Eli the priest. Today we open with Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas. The text doesn't mince its words.

Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD.

How does Hophni and Phineas' wickedness and irreverence show itself? In 2 ways: they sin against God and against the people. First, when people come to offer a sacrifice to God, they

greedily snatch the fat, the best part of the animal. Actually, it's not them, they send a servant to do their dirty work. Leviticus 3 instructed that the fat was to be burned as an offering to the Lord. They are ignoring the Lord's command and taking the best for themselves. What's worse, if the worshipper resists, they threaten violence and take it by force. And so the writer says, verse 17,

This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt.

To treat the LORD's offering with contempt is to treat God with contempt. This is the focus for the writer of Samuel. In today's secular age it might be hard for us to see what the fuss was about. But what comes next strikes a chord in our #MeToo age. In verse 22 we learn that they are also sleeping with the women who serve at the entrance of the sacred tent. Were these consensual encounters? Given the brothers willingness to use force to get the meat, it's much more likely they are abusing their position of spiritual leadership to get sexual favours, taking advantage of these women who had come to serve God.

It's so often that the two go together - a disregard for God, and a disregard for those made in his image. Their "private" peccadillos have grave public consequence. It affects all Israel, the whole community. We know this don't we? Whether it's Henry VIII, Prince Charles or Donald Trump. What we want are leaders of integrity, where what people are like in public is what they are like in private.

Eli takes them to task. His words to his sons are striking, verse 25:

If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the LORD, who will intercede for them?

The job of the priest was to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. That is, they were to represent the people before God, acting as a mediator, a go between. In exercising that function, they may have acted on God's behalf to bring peace between parties in conflict. But what happens when the priests themselves become corrupt, and the one they sin against is God himself. Who will act on their behalf then? It's an ominous warning. But the boys ignore their father. In fact, they're not boys: they are grown men, and Eli is old. We hear those terrible words - "it was the Lord's will to put them to death." God takes the abuse of leadership deadly seriously. That judgement is explained in the next, verses 27-36, and there we also see a word of hope for the people.

A faithful priest - 27-36

God sends a messenger to Eli. He rehearses the blessings God has given to Eli's house, the descendants of Moses. Chosen to be his priests. Given the food offerings of the Israelites. The

immeasurable privilege of being able to go before the presence of God himself. But how has Eli treated these gifts? With contempt. Verse 29

Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honour your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?

Yes, it's Eli's sons who have been greedily grabbing the fat of the sacrifice. But we have a sense that Eli has eaten the meat. In chapter 4 we learn that he's a "heavy" man.¹ And there's a play on words here that we see so often in Samuel. The word for "heavy" is also the word for "glory" or "honour". Eli has honoured his sons more than he's honoured God. He's given them more weight than God and so fattened himself.

And so God says, verse 30,

Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained. God will judge those who treat him with contempt and abuse their positions of power. Where Eli's line had received blessing, now they will be cursed. No one in their line will reach old age. Eli will see Hophni and Phineas die on the same day. God will replace them with a faithful priest. And the family who grew fat from the sacrifice, will now plead to be given a priestly office just to get a scrap of food. It's Hannah's song coming to pass. "The Lord brings down to the grave and raises up." "Those who were full hire themselves out for food." "Those who oppose the Lord will be broken."²

There are two things for us to notice in this section. The first is the challenge of parenting. Why is Eli condemned? Yes, he's benefited indirectly, but it's his sons who are grabbing the meat and the women. It's because he honoured them more than he honoured God. This is his failure as a father. We're left wondering, where did Hophni and Phineas learn to behave as they did? Eli likes to indulge in food, and maybe he's been indulging his sons over the years. He's been turning a blind eye to their indiscretions, and he only pulls them up when everyone else tells him about it.

Proverbs 22.6 says,

Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old, they will not turn from it.

Is this what Eli failed to do? And now, he's old and his sons are men. When he tries to reign them in, to teach them to honour God, it's too late. Eli's failures as a father and the sins of his sons, we tragically see repeated in the back half of Samuel with David and his sons. This time it's Absalom who sleeps with David's concubines under a tent on the roof of the palace, in the sight of all Israel.³

¹ 1 Samuel 4.18

² 1 Samuel 1.6,5,10

³ 2 Samuel 16.22

Eli offers a stark challenge for us as parents. To not just sit back and enjoy life, taking God's gifts for granted and choosing a life of ease and comfort, all the while neglecting to disciple our kids, to teach them the way of the Lord.

One of the saddest conversations I've had many times over the past 10 years here at St George's is with people who've said, "I don't understand, why don't my children and grandchildren go to church?" Sometimes I've asked, did you take them? Did you commit to going every Sunday yourself? Did you pray and read the Bible with them? The answer is usually no. Yes, your kids have to make their own choices about God. But we're always working against our fallen tendency to reject God. Discipleship is not something we can outsource to school or church. It's our responsibility as parents. We want to give them the best possible chance to say yes to God. It's a temptation for all of us to honour our kids above honouring God. In fact, you fail to honour God first, and you'll end up not honouring your kids as you should.

Eli offers us an invitation to invest in the spiritual lives of our kids. To take time to teach them how to read the Bible. How to pray. How to seek God. How to obey the 10 commandments. How to love their neighbours. It's something I know Claire and I need to grow in. Last year I listened to a podcast called the Intentional Family by an Australian pastor serving in New York, Jon Tyson. This year I'm reading his book, *The Intentional Father*. These have great practical ideas for how to make and carry out a discipleship plan for your kids. Maybe it's something we can all read as parents and support and encourage each other to put into effect.

The second thing to notice is God's promise in verse 35 to raise up a faithful priest who will do what is in God's heart and mind. As readers we of course have in mind Samuel. Through the story of the wickedness of Eli's sons, there has been a constant refrain: "And the boy ministered before the Lord." In Samuel, Eli gets a second chance. Where Eli's sons strayed, Samuel will be faithful. Eli trains the boy and we get a sense of the great affection that he has for Samuel. In the following chapter he calls Samuel my son. This is a word for the grandparents at St George's. You may feel like you've failed with your kids. But you have a chance to invest in the spiritual lives of your grandchildren. You can be an incredible influence, praying for them, teaching them, sharing your life of faith with them, inviting them to church. And for those who don't have kids, you could be an aunty or uncle in the faith to one of the St George's kids. What an opportunity to pass on a legacy of faith and sow into the next generation.

The LORD reveals himself - 3.1-4.1a

Chapter 3 is a beautiful account of God's call to Samuel. I'd just like to draw our attention to a few points. First, this is a wonderful affirmation of the faith of children. Jesus invites little

children to come to him, and here we see God calling Samuel. You don't have to be an adult or have an adult understanding to hear and respond to God's call. This is the complement to the nurturing and teaching in the faith we invest in our kids. Eli's teaching of Samuel sets him up to hear and respond to God's call.

Second, Eli teaches us the posture of faith. It's there in verse 9 and 10. "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." This is our responsibility. To be willing to listen to God's word. That word may be at times difficult to hear, as it was for Samuel who heard God's word of judgement on the house of Eli. But our loyalty must be to God, before family, and even our spiritual mentors.

Third, the theological theme of chapter 3 is this: that God reveals himself through his word. It's there in verse 1. "In those days the word of the Lord was rare." In verse 7: "Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him." And there in verse 21: "The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word." Indeed, Samuel takes on the role not just of priest, but also of prophet. To speak God's word to the people. The same is true for us today. God speaks to us and reveals himself through his word, that is the Bible, and especially as it finds its fulfilment in Jesus, the Word of God incarnate. Hebrews 1 says,

"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son."⁴

That brings us to our final point. Today we've seen the failure of spiritual leadership; That God takes it so seriously that he will judge those who treat him and his people with contempt. We've also seen his promise that he would raise up a faithful priest. Samuel shows us what this priest is like, one who will also speak God's words to the people. The text has a little hint as to how this promise will ultimately be fulfilled. Verse 26 says,

And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favour with the LORD and with people.

Luke uses the exact same phrase to describe how the boy Jesus grew.⁵ You see those offices of prophet and priest are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, the eternal Word who reveals the Father. He is the true and greater priest who is utterly faithful to God.

Reading these chapters, I'm so conscious of my failings as your leader, and as a father. No doubt you know this for yourself in the positions of authority you hold. But where Eli's question to his sons was a warning, we may also find it a comfort. "If someone sins against God, who will intercede for them?" The answer is Jesus. He's our faithful high priest. He is the mediator

⁴ Hebrews 1.1-2

⁵ Luke 2.52

between us and God. He offers his own life in sacrifice for our sins, so that through him we might know God's forgiveness. And he is not distant. He is like us in every way, except without sin, so able to empathise with our weakness. Through him we can approach the throne of grace and find grace to help us in our need.⁶

⁶ Hebrews 4.14-16, 1 John 2.1-2