

Eyes and Heart

A Sermon on 1 Samuel 16

With chapter sixteen we move into the next major section of 1 Samuel. Over the last two weeks at St George's we've been working our way through chapters 9 to 15, chapters that have to do with the rise and fall, the election and rejection, of Israel's first king, Saul. We began with Saul, the young man who went looking for donkeys only to find a kingdom; we ended with the deeply unsettling words, 'And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.' This week we turn to the next major character in the book, David, and to what scholars since Leonhard Rost have called the 'History of David's Rise,' that is, the portion of 1 and 2 Samuel that extends from 1 Samuel 16 through to 2 Samuel 5. The sermon is in two parts, beginning with Samuel's politically destabilising, covert anointing of David in vv. 1-13, and concluding with David's introduction into Saul's court in vv. 14-23.

Let's pray:

Father, please give us ears to listen well to your Word to us this morning. Please help us to understand your Word, and to apply it sensitively to our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PART ONE

Seeing and Choosing

'How long will you mourn for Saul,' the LORD says to Samuel, 'since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.' If God's words seem stern and brusque in translation, they're even more so in the Hebrew: the verb **מתאבל**, which the NIV translates as 'mourn', could also be translated as 'play the mourner', suggesting that Samuel's grief over Saul is somewhat overblown, or theatrical. At the very least, God is fingering a wound, by drawing attention to Samuel's emotionally intense relationship with Israel's first king. Samuel relates to Saul much as

my grandfather used to relate to my Dad: his love for him amounts to a sort of furious pride, responsible both for public outbursts of affection – ‘Do you see the man the LORD has chosen?’ he asks Israel in chapter 10, ‘There is no one like him among all the people’ – and devastatingly public confrontations, as we’ve seen in chapters 13 and 15.

Samuel’s reaction to the LORD’s instructions is striking, given that he has publicly rebuked Saul in the most uncompromising terms in the immediately preceding chapter: ‘How can I go?’ he asks the LORD. ‘If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.’ You get the sense that Samuel’s public confrontation with Saul has turned him into something of a pariah, an enemy of the state, an impression only heightened when Samuel arrives in Bethlehem and the town elders ‘tremble’ at his coming. Samuel’s question is also a window into the kind of tension experienced by later prophets such as Elijah and Jeremiah—impelled by God to speak out against monarchs, privately wanting nothing so much as to curl up into a ball and wait out the storm that their words have stirred up.

Having provided Samuel with a plausible cover-story, God has Samuel assemble together Jesse, Jesse’s sons and the elders of Bethlehem for what proves to be the clandestine anointing of Israel’s second king. This secret anointing, despite its inherently dramatic possibilities, is actually only a foil to the real action of the passage, which takes place entirely within the confines of Samuel’s head. It’s relatively unusual for a Hebrew narrator to give his readers access to a character’s thoughts, but that’s just what happens here. Samuel instructs Jesse to have his seven sons walk before him, and at the sight of the eldest, Eliab, Samuel allows himself to be carried away by the man’s appearance and height (much as he had been Saul’s), and says to himself, ‘Surely the LORD’s anointed stands here before the LORD.’

God replies: just as he had rejected Saul, so has he ‘rejected’ Eliab. And he grounds this rejection in a compressed statement about divine and human ‘seeing’:

כִּי לֹא אֲשַׁר יִרְאֶה הָאָדָם כִּי הָאָדָם יִרְאֶה לְעֵינָיו וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְלֵבָב:

One option when translating this, as I said, rather compressed saying, is that followed by the NIV, namely:

‘The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.’

This translation puts the accent on the thing that one is looking at. People, just like Samuel in the previous verse, excessively influenced by Eliab’s appearance, tend to fixate on *outward*

characteristics such as physical beauty or skill. The LORD, however, focuses his attention on the heart, or what is *inside* a person: their character, or disposition. If this is how the saying is best translated, then its meaning is as follows: learn to see as God sees. Don't select your leaders on the basis of their outward appearance, or even their obvious abilities. Concentrate, rather, on those things about a person that only become obvious with time: their character; how they handle disappointment, or rebuke, or for that matter success; their faithful service not only when the work is easy, but also when it's hard-going and unrewarding. And you could easily broaden the application to cover, not just leaders, but anyone and everyone. In a culture that's driven by optics and perception, this saying urges us to cultivate instead disciplined ways of thinking and acting over time as the raw material from which – we pray – a godly character will in time emerge.

Still staying with this interpretation for the moment, we could then look at how this maxim finds fulfilment in the life of Jesus. It's a striking fact that the first Christians chose to preserve absolutely nothing about Jesus' physical appearance, and that the closest that the Old Testament prophets come to giving such a description states that

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

Becoming Christian has arguably quite a lot to do with looking beneath surfaces. It has to do, for example, with looking at Jesus' crucifixion – at what is outwardly an horrific and violent and disfiguring act –, and seeing in it, even as it enacts the will of evil men, God the Son's willingness to stand in the place of judgement, freely taking the punishment for the things we do that would otherwise stop us from being able to live as the children of a holy God. This is a message about learning to look at things the way God does.

Another way to translate this passage is to place the accent, not on what one sees, but rather on the part of oneself which one uses to see. This comes across quite nicely in the translation given by the Jewish critic, Robert Alter, who writes: 'For man sees with the eyes and God sees with the heart.' Now, one could take this as adding up to much the same thing as the more traditional translation: people use their eyes to see what is visible to the eyes, that is, the surface of a person; God, however, uses the insight of the heart to discern what is within a person, namely, their motives and character traits. On the other hand, it's worth noting that the Hebrew verb **ראה** not only means 'to see', but can also mean 'to seek out' or 'choose', as it does twice in this chapter (and the broader context is, of course, all about selecting, or choosing, a king). In verse one, for

example, God tells Samuel that he has chosen (רָאִיתִי) a son of Jesse to be king. It's possible, then, that the writer of 1 Samuel 16 is saying that the reason for God's choice of David ultimately resides not in anything that David possesses, whether superficially or at a deeper level, but rather in the mystery of God's will (remembering that for Ancient Israelites, the heart was thought of metaphorically as the seat of the will). And this translation is going to be attractive to those of us who want to bring how God chooses kings into line with how he chooses in general, and particularly, how he chooses *us*: that is, in a fundamentally mysterious way, irrespective of anything attractive about ourselves and often despite any number of *un*attractive character traits. As Paul wrote in his Letter to Titus, 'But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.' It's also a translation that, let's be honest, is going to be attractive to readers conscious of some of the uglier sides of David's character as they emerge over the course of the following chapters.

That said, and for what it's worth, I think the first translation is the stronger of the two, and also that in choosing someone to be the ruler of a people God is not necessarily providing us with a paradigm case of how election works in general. Ultimately, however, what makes our translation dilemma so suggestive is the fact that it picks up on two closely intertwined aspects of 1 and 2 Samuel's artistry: its naturalistic presentation of human behaviour and character, on the one hand, and its pervasive sense of God's purposes working themselves out in human history, on the other. Fix these two features of 1 and 2 Samuel in your minds, then, because they're central to everything that's going to happen over the next few weeks!

The climax of the first half of the chapter occurs with the arrival of David. Disconcertingly, given God's statement in v. 7, the first thing that the narrator wants to tell us about Israel's future king is that he was 'glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features'! And just as Saul's stature won him Samuel's admiration back in chapter 10, so throughout the course of the next few chapters we will see David's beauty win for him, first the affection of Saul, and then, to Saul's increasing dismay, the love of his daughter Michal and the friendship of his son Jonathan. The scene then ends with the Spirit of the LORD coming with power upon David (just as he had upon Saul back in chapter 10), and Samuel's departure for Ramah.

PART TWO

Two Spirits

The Spirit's descent on David is followed up swiftly by the switch in focus back to Saul in the first verse of the next scene:

Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.

David may now have become the focus of interest for the narrator, but Saul is still very much an abiding presence in the story he's telling. Hebrew narrative is typically expansive and often allows readers to develop alternative interpretations of events or characters, and Saul is a good case in point. One way to view Saul is as a hapless himbo: tall, strong, and handsome, physically he seems to be everything one could wish for in a king; intellectually, though, he does best when following the suggestions of his subordinates, and when he does strike out on his own, all too often winds up making a mess of things.

Another way of viewing Saul, however, is to see in him a tragic hero. Here, for example, is the assessment of my favourite Old Testament scholar, Gerhard von Rad. For von Rad, Saul is pictured in the Bible as

the anointed who slipped through Jahweh's hand, the one quitting the stage, and yielding to him who is coming ... Saul ... the God-forsaken, driven from one delusion to the other, desperate, and in the end swallowed up in miserable darkness. Right to the end the stories follow the unhappy king on his way with a deep human sympathy, and unfold a tragedy which in its final act rises to solemn grandeur... Never again did Israel give birth to a poetic production which in certain of its features has such close affinity with the spirit of Greek tragedy.

That's quite a bleak reading of Saul, but it's in many ways a compelling one: Saul never sought out the kingship; he's beautifully and strikingly humble as we first encounter him; he's capable of immense bravery, and magnanimity when given the opportunity to exact revenge on his personal enemies. All he suffers from is a tiny, little character flaw, which is that he doesn't like to look stupid in front of people. And that tiny character flaw is what will eventually destroy him, and it's this reading of Saul's character that I want you to bear in mind as we enter into the second, more melancholy half of his career.

With the Spirit having come upon David in force, Saul, bereft of the Spirit, now finds himself at the mercy of a **רוּחַ רָעָה מֵאֵת יְהוָה**, an evil spirit from the LORD. Saul experiences the **רוּחַ רָעָה** as a source of torment, while his servants are in agreement with the narrator that it is God who has visited the spirit upon him. The evil spirit is also incapacitating: Saul here is heavily dependent upon his servants and their suggestions, much as he was upon his father's servant back in chapter nine, prior to his first encounter with Samuel.

Saul's affliction with the evil spirit is, ironically, the catalyst for David's entry into Saul's court. With all the swiftness one expects of Hebrew narrative, Saul finds his own successor installed in his own court, and himself reliant upon one filled with the very same Spirit whose departure has left him a prey to the tormenting and disabling, albeit intermittent, influence of the evil spirit.

There are several questions that modern readers are likely to have in response to this passage. Here are two that come to mind. Firstly, some of you will be wondering: Everyone in this passage seems perfectly comfortable with the idea of God sending an evil spirit to torment someone, but how is this consistent with the Bible's portrait of God being perfectly good, never doing evil? And secondly, others of you may be thinking: I've never encountered an evil spirit in my life. What Saul is suffering, however, does look quite similar to what I've seen in others and had described to me as a form of mental illness. Can I think of Saul as being psychologically unwell and is that a responsible way of handling this passage?

Let me take each of these problems in reverse order. These are some of the things I think are relevant when thinking through whether or not it's a desirable thing to correlate spirit possession as described in the Bible with mental illness as it's experienced in our culture today. Firstly, I think it's worth acknowledging that there is significant overlap with regard to the symptoms experienced by friends who suffer mental illness and some of the behaviours exhibited by people described as spirit-possessed in the Bible. Saul's black, depressive moods, with periodic outbursts of violent paranoia are things that some of us will have experienced either for ourselves or in someone we're close to. Secondly, many of the social ramifications of biblical spirit-possession have clear analogues in many people's experience of living with a mental illness, although there is of course a huge variety in the way that mental illness is treated and regarded socially in our culture.

Nonetheless, neatly mapping the one onto the other creates, in my view, more problems than it solves. Jesus explicitly teaches that those who have the Holy Spirit have nothing to fear from spirit-possession, and it's a logical consequence of redescribing spirit-possession as mental illness

that many people currently experiencing mental illness may come to question whether they do in fact have the Spirit. Now, Christians, of course, are no less likely to suffer a mental illness than their neighbours, just as they're no less likely to experience physical illness. But Christians can have confidence that the Spirit will help them to endure mental illness in the same way that He promises to help us in all forms of suffering. It's simpler, and preferable theologically, too, to think of evil spirits and mental illness as distinct things, even though both attack the mind, sometimes in strikingly similar ways. David is not a music therapist – he's a music exorcist!

The first question I raised is of course much more difficult to answer. And it's a problem that's of central importance to 1 and 2 Samuel, as it is to much of the Bible more broadly. At a systematic level, it's worth stating the obvious, which is that the problem of evil is intellectually (as opposed to experientially) a problem only for people who believe in only one God, who is both all powerful and all good. It's not a problem that arises for polytheists; nor is it an issue for atheists. And all biblical thinking about this problem will have to honour particular passages in the Bible. On the one hand, Christians will want to take with perfect seriousness John's statement that 'God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all'. But they will also take seriously the Bible's claim that nothing that takes place occurs without the foreknowledge and permission of God. 'I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God,' God says in the Book of Isaiah. 'I form the light and I create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.' All distinctively Christian thinking about the problem of evil needs to hold on to both these statements without collapsing them into contradiction or surrendering either of them in the process.

At the level of the passage itself, the servants are perfectly right when they say that it is the LORD who has sent the evil spirit that torments Saul. But neither the servants nor the narrator tell us *why* God has sent him. In narrative terms, the advent of the evil spirit is the issue that allows the narrator to introduce David to Saul. Positively, the result is, of course, to bring David into the court and thus to provide him with the sorts of opportunities and environment that will enable him to develop the skills necessary to lead Israel. It also allows for a man empowered with the Holy Spirit to shoulder increasing responsibility in the state at a time when its current leader has shown himself to be more concerned with how he appears before his men than with how he looks before God. And we could also surmise that God is punishing Saul for his *hubris* in failing to carry out his instructions in the previous chapter. But none of this is actually stated in the narrative, just as we, in our own lives, generally have no firm knowledge of why we suffer the things we do. But we *do* live in a world where nothing is ultimately outside the control of our

loving and wise God, who orders all things for our good, a world in which God's Spirit brings us relief and intercedes for us in accordance with God's will.

Let's pray:

Father, help us to see people as you see them. Help us to make important decisions on the basis of what is actually important, as opposed to merely superficial. We also thank you choosing us, not because of anything we'd done, but because of your great kindness and mercy. Thank for sending us your Spirit, to comfort us and to empower us to serve you.

In Jesus' name,

Amen