

Samuel 8:1-22

King of Our Hearts

Honouring God as King

There are times when scripture and life really line up. We have just come through an election which has seen the former leadership of the Liberal government in Ontario tested and seen wanting to the people as they went to the polls last Thursday and completely overturned things. The majority the Liberals had enjoyed was taken from them to the point that they cannot even retain official party status and the Progressive Conservative party with leader Doug Ford now form the government.

People wanted change and they got it big time. Now only time will tell if they get the change they hoped for or, if once again as happens over and over with governments, we are disappointed with promises not fulfilled and people suffering consequences of decisions that help only the rich and continue the suffering of those in greatest need.

In Samuel's time leadership was also an issue. Israel had been led by what were called Judges for some time. But this was not a unified type of governance. The nation of Israel was not really a nation but rather tribes that came together under judges. These judges would come to the foreground when it seemed that Israel needed defending. Most would succeed for a time and then fall away from God. Making decisions that were self-serving rather than God's will and they and the people suffered the consequences of their decisions.

Samuel was a judge, prophet, and a priest. Last week you heard of God's calling on Samuel's young life and Samuel was faithful to that call. Problem was, at this point, he was getting old. He had sons that he had appointed as judges over Israel, "Yet his sons did not follow in [Samuel's] ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice." (1 Sam 8:3)

And though Samuel had been a prayerful and faith man of God, it had not stopped the invasion of the land that the Israelites held, as nations around them continually threatened and overtook the Hebrew people. At times there was some peace between factions or when countries own inward turmoil distracted neighbouring rulers from bothering with the Israelites, but that never lasted and once again the people would be in the throws of war.

The people, recognizing that Samuel would not live forever to watch over them and be the mediator between them and God asked for a king. Why a king? Well everybody else had one. And this was the greatest sadness for God and for Samuel. You see the Hebrew people had always been set apart for God. Their head and ruler was to be God,

the God who had led them out of the slavery and bondage of Egypt. The God who had commanded that first and foremost “you shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 10:3)

They had pretty much direct access to God and now they were going to settle for second best. The intention had always been that God would be their king, but in asking for a king the people were in essence rejecting God’s rule over their lives.

Now again, their request may have seemed reasonable. It was a new form of government that they had not experienced, and it appeared to be working for the nations around them. A king would centralize power and make the nation more efficient and hopefully more effective at defending itself from those who might try to overtake them. But that was also the problem, at least for Samuel and God. The Hebrew people had been called to be different from everyone else, they were to trust God as their leader.

Asking for a king meant that they did not trust God as God had hoped, but it turns out this is human nature. We desire to lean on our own understanding, to take things into our own hands, and God allows it, but we end suffer the consequences of those decisions. The Hebrew people, even after being taken out of slavery, had distrusted God and they ended up wandering around in the wilderness for forty years. It was so each time the people and rulers rejected God and were led by their own understanding.

Here again in this Old Testament story, the people lean on their own wisdom and not that of God and will suffer the consequences. God has revealed to them through Samuel what will happen if they go this route, but they still demand a king. They are told in great detail that rule by a king will lead to sons becoming soldiers, people made to till the ground for the king and to reap the king’s harvest. Daughters will end up in harems and as workers for the king. The king will basically take what he wants and use it for his personal gain and the people will become the slaves of the kings

And then it is forecast that when the people cry out to God because of their king and what they are experiencing under the king’s rule, Samuel tells them “the Lord will not answer you in that day.” (1 Sam 8:18c) Even with all of this told to them “the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, ‘No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.’(1 Sam 8:19-20).

So, God says to Samuel, “Let them have what they want.” The people get a king and they suffer for their decision. Oh, at first it seems all is well. But people will always disappoint. People, all of us people, are imperfect. We get caught up in power and prestige, honour and shame, pride and sinfulness. We can’t help ourselves.

What does this mean for us? We know ourselves to be imperfect, or at least we should understand that to be human means that we are imperfect. All of us disappoint. I will disappoint you. It cannot be otherwise, because I, you, all of us, are imperfect. We all

have our perspective of how the world should revolve around us or how others should behave and act based in our own experience of the world and the people we have encountered. And if we stay in that, in our own expectations of the world and people who are a part of our lives we will be like the people who demanded a king. We suffer the consequences of our thinking, decisions, and behavior.

The closest analogy may be parenting and teaching. We do our best to lead children and students in the way they should go, but at some point they make their own decisions and reap the benefits and the harm. But we have to allow it. It doesn't mean that we quit loving and supporting them. It just means that we have given them the choice to do as they see best and letting them know we are there for them, close by in joy and in sorrow.

Going back to the idea of governance, the way of the world is that we will always be governed by others, but as individuals we can choose who will be the king of our heart, minds, and lives. For us it is a matter of whether those we chose to govern over us have a heart for God and if we are choosing to claim God as King and Jesus as Lord of our own lives.

For those of us living in Canada, king and lord seem like archaic terms. We have just witnessed or at least been aware of a royal wedding, heard of queen, princes, princesses, lords and ladies, but for most of us it has little bearing on our lives. To think of God as being king might feel like we are going back into the dark ages. But really, we allow something to rule over us all the time. Money, alcohol or other substances, possessions, recognition in our jobs, power in our families or in the world, often these become the rulers of our lives. They are self-imposed, but they rule our hearts and our thinking. In even the most innocent of thoughts where we believe we know and understand better than another we show signs of the desire to lord it over another.

Being human seems to mean that we make wrong decisions, hurt others, suffer, get angry, become broken hearted, and still think that we have the right to have power over others. And when I talk power, you may be thinking that you have no power, but each of us has the power to do good or ill in this world. To bring joy or to bring sorrow.

When we rely on our own understanding of how the world should be it can be very limiting. We cannot know how everyone experiences the world and governments will always fall because they are made up of imperfect people. It may take years, it may only take months, but when we rely on others or ourselves to manage the world, to bring order to our lives, we will always be disappointed.

Thankfully, God has not stayed silent as he said he would when the people of Samuel's time demanded a king. You see, God still works with imperfect people, and through the line of kings God gave us Jesus. In Jesus we once again have access to God. We can rely on God to be with us. But it takes paying attention. If we look to other things for our direction and salvation we will come up short. If we stay steadfast in our trust in God, our imperfect lives will not become perfect, but we will experience a grace and peace in

the midst of turmoil and struggle, in loving and being loved, that we would not have in and of ourselves and those who rule over us.

We need to discern each day, in each decision, in every relationship, who is king of our hearts, minds, and lives. May your answer be God, in whom you can find steadfast love, forgiveness, peace, joy, hope, and grace.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.