

***What kind of leader? – 1 Samuel 8: 4-15 Mark 3: 20-35***  
**A sermon for Sunday 6 June, 2021 by Rev Phil Wootton**

Statues have become controversial. We thought famous leaders like Richard the Lionheart, the Duke of Wellington or even Winston Churchill could be heroically cast in bronze, lifted onto a plinth and left to be admired or ignored. But now it's obligatory they are re-examined and, very often, found to be statues with feet of clay. Some of us are seriously riled by attacks on national heroes, whilst others are even more riled by what these 'heroes' are taken to represent. Underneath the argument is the simple question, what sort of leaders do we actually want? Exactly the same question is demanded by our Old Testament reading today, as we begin a series about the kings of ancient Israel. In this passage, we learn of the origins of kingship, and over weeks to come we will hear the long tale of King David, another great leader with feet of clay.

The people wanted a king, and they got what they wanted. You might say it's the nearest to democracy that you get in the Old Testament. You could also say it proves democracy can get things wrong. The people made a choice, and the people chose badly. The question you then have to face is how to live well with the choices that have been made.

The people's choice was deeply offensive: it was offensive to Samuel, who had been 'judge' or leader for decades, and it was offensive to God. It was offensive to Samuel because they just said, 'You're too old. You can't be in charge any more'. That sounds very familiar to us, in our deeply ageist culture: we seem to have no time for the wisdom of experience, no patience with those who want a little longer to think, no truck with those who are not up with the latest in technology. So, what was wrong with Samuel's leadership style? Well, Samuel was a moral and spiritual leader. He devoted himself to listening to God's instruction. He quietly went about his business, going from place to place, arbitrating disputes and dispensing justice in the different communities of Israel. And when battle came, you'd find him praying, and the text makes clear his prayers were decisive in the outcome of the fight. But the people thought he was past his sell-by date.

The people said, 'We want a king.' Why? – mainly, to lead an army; mainly, to impress other countries; mainly, to look strong and powerful. The people were afraid. Israel was puny. Samuel's 'national tour' – based on the named places – was no bigger than the size of Staffordshire. The Philistines threatened their borders. Little Israel could be engulfed at any moment. This took place around the beginnings of the iron age, and there are a few hints in the text that the Philistines had iron weapons and the Israelites didn't. You can hear the people grumbling: 'That Samuel? He was all right in his day, but a bit stuck in his ways. He won't use the latest technology. How can he lead us, make us strong, keep us safe, give us glory? We want a king.'

God warns the people through Samuel what kings will be like. You want a king to fight battles? Remember it will be your sons conscripted into his armies and killed in his wars. You want a king to impress your neighbours with sumptuous feasts? It will be your

daughters who will be forced to work as the perfumers, cooks and bakers. You want a king to show off his wealth? Remember it will be your crops he claims, your money he taxes, your land – the best land – he takes. You will be made to forge his weapons and wear your fingers to the bone in his fields, vineyards and olive groves. Even so, ‘Yes,’ say the people, ‘we want a king like every other country has a king.’

This last statement is the worst of all, because it was offensive to God. It was offensive to God because they rejected not only God’s own leadership of the nation, but more than that, they rejected the vision God had for Israel. God called Israel to be different, to be dedicated to him, to be light for the nations. But the people said, ‘We don’t want to be different. We want to be like the other nations. We want to make our own choices. We’re happy with their standards. We want to be the same as everyone else.’ In the end, God says, ‘I’ll give you a king, but don’t say you weren’t warned.’

So, under God’s guidance, Samuel finds Saul to be king. And Saul looks impressive. Saul is a young man, a good head taller than anyone else. (Why do we think tall people are suited to lead?) Saul has some success, wins some battles, the tide of Philistine advance is reversed, and some of the foundations are laid for great King David. He is spiritual, in his own way. He receives God’s Spirit to help him, even joining with prophets in ecstatic speech. But Saul is seriously flawed. He panics easily: when Samuel came to acclaim him king, he hid himself in the baggage train and had to be dragged out. Later on, paralysed by doubt, he keeps turning back to Samuel, and then shows himself fiercely jealous of David, his protégé. A hero-king, perhaps, but with not only feet, but also legs and thighs of clay!

What sort of leadership do we want? What sort of leadership do we give? – for we all lead at times, whether at work or at home, in church or in the community. Every time we influence someone else or persuade them to do something, we are giving leadership. Too often, I fear, we picture a leader as the Israelites did asking for a king – strong, powerful getting their own way, domineering their enemies. There may be times such strength is needed, but the qualities of Samuel are needed more often and should never go out of date: integrity, honesty, diligence, humility, willingness to listen to God’s instruction. Insecurity, ultimately, wrecked Saul’s kingship, whereas Samuel had learnt from boyhood that you lead by following God’s call.

What sort of leadership do we want, and try to give? Our answer, as always, should be to look to Jesus. Jesus did not impress everyone but confused people every bit as much. As we heard in today’s Gospel reading, he was very much misunderstood, even by his own family, and maligned as being in league with evil forces. How offensive can you get. But he had complete clarity in his own mind about who he was and what he was called to do, meaning he was not swayed by ‘the people’s demands.’ He had a very simple guide: to do the will of God; and he would work with anyone willing to share in doing the will of God. And there is as good a guide as we can have as we look for the leaders we want, and the leaders we try to be.