

Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6) – Year B – June 17, 2009 - Homily
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34
Susan E. Wilmot

Roman poet, Ovid, once wrote, “Divine power plays with human affairs.” I’m sure that Ovid was thinking along the lines of the pantheon of gods so popular in Greek and Roman history, rather than Yahweh, the God of Israel. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Yahweh has also directed the affairs of humanity at least when it came to choosing His earthly royal representatives.

In tonight’s reading from the first book of Samuel we need to do a little catch up on the storyline in order to experience the full impact of God’s actions, Saul’s, Samuel’s and our own deeds as obedient servants of God’s will. Samuel is a prophet of God. As the Israelites grew in numbers and settled in the Promised Land, they were surrounded by other nations and began to covet the type of organizational structures that they saw all around them. Despite the fact that Yahweh makes it perfectly clear that He is their God and King alone, the Israelites reject Yahweh’s direct rule and demand their own king as God’s earthly representative. Through the prophet Samuel, God warns what will happen if Israel invests power and authority to an earthly king. The details are quite explicit and apply today, even in countries like ours who don’t necessarily have a king. Here’s a snippet from God’s warning to Israel from 1 Samuel chapter 8:11-17, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, ... and to make his implements of war He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.” Brought into modern-day language, I think we can all relate to the draft during times of war, paying our taxes, political nepotism and favoritism, and government land grabs!

Despite God’s warning the Israelites continue to ask for a kingly representative and God grants the request, directing the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul as their first king. Unfortunately, that appointment doesn’t work out too well. As Walter Brueggemann writes, “The price of power is, ‘listening’ and Saul did not pay the price.” Saul disobeys God’s commandments and God rejects Saul as king over Israel. God enters into human affairs again as he directs Samuel to go to Jesse the Bethlehemite in order to secretly anoint a new king over Israel. Jesse has eight sons that he is asked to bring before Samuel at the sacrifice. At this intimate private gathering, Samuel has been instructed to anoint the one that God has chosen. The message of this part of the reading is at least two-fold: outward appearances can be deceptive; and, as is frequently the case in God’s way of selecting leadership among the Israelites, “the least shall be first”, so to speak.

Each of the sons of Jesse is brought before Samuel in turn, beginning with the eldest. Samuel may be a prophet of God, but he’s only human too, and susceptible as anyone else to the delights of the eye, otherwise known as judging by appearances. God’s word is clear – God is not looking at externals, but at the heart of each of Jesse’s sons, amongst whom God has provided for Himself a king over Israel. The verb “provided” might equally be translated as “seen”. In other words God sees the hearts of all His children. Despite being told that God is not interested in outward appearances, a great deal of the passage is given over to the descriptive, especially when it comes to David, Jesse’s youngest son, who is out tending the sheep. Although we know that God does not choose David based on his physical appearance, the author nonetheless tells us that he is “ruddy, has beautiful eyes, and was handsome”. The truth is, most of us are highly visual

people and it should be no surprise at all that we generally favor all things attractive! I once heard that the best con-artists and thieves are good-looking men and women. When combined with bad intent and nice clothes they can easily insert themselves into our lives, hearts, offices, stores and bank accounts. Appearances can indeed be deceptive!

The second lesson from this reading is about the least being first. As is often the case in the history of salvation, a younger son is chosen by God as leader over one or more older brothers. Think of the stories of Jacob and Esau, where Jacob is elected; or Joseph over his older brothers, to name but two key figures in our faith tradition. In this case, the humble shepherd boy becomes the shepherd of all Israel, and the forefather of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The action has been arranged so dramatically, that even though in the Judeo-Christian tradition, David is remembered as the greatest King of Israel, we do not even learn his name until the closing sentences of this passage. He is the relatively marginalized, unimportant, eighth son of Jesse.

Perhaps because I just saw the movie *Angels and Demons*, I couldn't resist looking into whether the number eight had any symbolic significance. And in fact it does, although not one commentary I looked at made mention of it. The number eight is the number of regeneration, rather like the symbol for eternity, that spiraling figure eight on its side. In Christian art, the number eight is also the symbol for baptism, because it represents resurrection. Jesus rose from the tomb on the eighth day after His final entry into Jerusalem. Baptismal fonts, including our own here at The Church of Our Saviour are often octagonal for that very reason. It may be something. It may be nothing. But given David's pivotal role in God's history of salvation, being the eighth son is interesting indeed.

Samuel duly anoints David, and the Holy Spirit comes upon him mightily. His transformation has begun, and by his obedience to God's will and commandments, David will be the one who leads the transformation of a small nation with questionable worship practices into a mighty kingdom proclaiming the One true God. There are great truths about power, service and leadership for us all to see in this reading. Appearances mean little to God, but the humble state of our hearts is of greatest importance. God seeks out those who are willing to serve Him in humble obedience. And the Holy Spirit empowers, guides and directs according to God's will. Given that all power comes from God, and it is to God that we are each accountable for how we use it, may we always strive to practice these truths as we grow and learn together.

Amen.