

THE FIRST BOOK OF SAMUEL

3. *Despair or Hope?* (1 Samuel 16)

“You never get a second chance to make a first impression” You’ll probably remember that head and Shoulders advert for the TV. It’s founded upon a simple fact: people judge by the evidence of their eyes first and it’s often that first impression that sticks.

We live in a society where appearance is important. Expensive clothes, expensive car and the like are a “fashion statement”. But if we stay on the TV theme, do you remember Mrs Hyacinth Bucket from “Keeping up Appearances”. To her, how she looked and what she did belied the fact that she was of humble origins. She tried to keep her sister and husband away from the house because they were poor and common. The problems, for all her “airs and graces” the stories about her were designed to uncover how ordinary Hyacinth really was.

It’s also true at a national level too. Many people like to take pride in the nation and get upset when hooligans or lager louts let the country down - or the football team for that matter. I did an assembly on St David’s Day in Greenhoe this week and we looked at some of the symbols that make people proud to be Welsh. And on St David they mark it with wearing those symbols.

That’s the 21st century. But it was true millennia ago too. For the Israelites, appearance and credibility was important to them as their nation grew in influence. And in previous weeks we hear of how they desired their a king because they felt that having God as their king was not enough. As the Lord said to Samuel, it was He they had rejected so God gave them the sort of king *they* wanted - just like the other pagan nations around them. He was Saul. A man head and shoulders above them all, a real leader of men, a fine warrior - just the sort of charismatic leader they required.

It’s just that Saul was very weak in the wisdom and spirituality department as indeed were the people! They got the man they wanted - the one they asked for - but they didn’t get one that was after God’s own heart. As we heard last week, Saul failed and failed miserably. All the success went to his head, he took liberties and frankly was as daft as a brush. And like every “good” politician who gets caught; when exposed he lied and tried to wriggle his way out of it. He might have been a king, but he still was wholly responsible still to the God of Israel.

It must have been a big come-down for the ageing Samuel too. Samuel had faithfully judged Israel for years, particularly as the nation was picking itself up from one of the lowest parts of its history after the Ark of the Covenant was returned after the disgrace of losing it to the Philistines. He was responsible in chapter 7 for bringing back pride but he had to wait 20 years for that because it took that long for Israel to repent! (7:2-5). Look at chapter 7 with me for a moment:

Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines. 14 The towns from Ekron to Gath that the Philistines had captured from Israel were restored to her, and Israel delivered the neighboring territory from the power of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. 15 Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life.

And there came this period of peace for Israel. But as he got older it fell apart as he got his sons to act as judges in his place:

8:1 When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. 2 The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. 3 But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

It was back to square one. His sons did the same as Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas. It must have been a disappointment and we know he showed dismay as the people asked for a king instead. Samuel ended up anointing Saul who turned out to be another flop: history was repeating itself - another failed leader! What a disaster - but God had other plans and as we read, Samuel was sent to Jesse's house in Bethlehem.

Tonight I want to try and focus on Samuel rather than Jesse or David. The reason why is that he came across to me in this passage as a man who may have been sure of his ground in the past but was now showing the same weaknesses as the rest. What would make me think that?

🕒 He started to fear Saul

But Samuel said, "How can I go? Saul will hear about it and kill me."

Just a moment. This is Samuel, for many years a judge and prophet in Israel; a man who had walked close to God. He was the prophet that had only just fearlessly confronted Saul. And now he fears what Saul might do to him? Oh dear! He was Samuel the prophet; but where was his own self-esteem now?

The people had no problem with who he was. Look at the reception he got at Bethlehem ***When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, "Do you come in peace?" Samuel replied, "Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me***

You can imagine their reaction when the prophet and judge arrived. "Oh no! It's the prophet. What have we done wrong!" They knew and accepted his authority so what was wrong with Samuel? He was still the prophet, but was living his life in self doubt although to be fair, he obeyed what he was asked to do.

Crises of confidence are something that get to us all. We lose our way at some point and struggle with ourselves and our faith. You all know what I mean. If you're honest, you've been there. And maybe some of you are there tonight. In our heads we know who we are; the people of God. We stand on God's promises, we know them, we rehearse them but our hearts are low and telling us a different tale.

That is also reflective of the crisis of confidence of the church in this country today. It's a crisis of confidence in what God can do now. We see what God can do in scripture, we see what God has made us in Christ, we see how God is working in other parts of the world and we see what God is doing even in other parts of Britain. So why isn't He doing it here in Norfolk? What's the reason?

None - except that we are people who just don't believe that transformation can happen here because our expectations have been the opposite for too long. We are Samuels. We've seen the glory in the past. Many of you like me lived through more exciting times when churches were full and Christians were common. I lived through the Sixties and Seventies with fuller churches, Billy Graham and vibrant church life. But we've seen the decline and lived through it. Just as he had problems with his sons we've seen that the legacy of this generation - our generation. It's a generation that has turned it's back on God and the churches have emptied as the river of new converts has started to dry up.

Like it or not, we are all products of a failing church in this land. It's not nice to say but it's the truth. We've been part of that decline. We may blame others - we probably do. We may say how faithful it is that we are still here whilst others have fallen away. But we are part of that failure because the modern church has come out of what we were part of.

We have to understand that we are as much part of the problem, just as Samuel had to realise he was part of it. All this was precipitated because *his* sons had failed and that was *his* responsibility because *he* appointed them! Things were going fine as long as he was judge, but like Eli, as much of a man of God he might have been, the same wisdom had not passed to his sons. And he was responsible for that and I suspect he knew that too. And the people asked for a king and the one they got was not much better - Saul.

He started to take the values of the world

What may help us explain Samuel's behaviour is what then happens when he is presented to Jesse's sons:

6 When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen this one." 10 Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these."

What does a king look like. Saul was big, muscular and a good fighter. As Samuel comes to Eliab he seems to have been looking at another Saul - big and handsome. We get these famous words *The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart* I was going to follow the pack and preach on this verse tonight but then I saw Samuel's behaviour and realised that God wanted us to look at Samuel rather than David.

Samuel was being just as bad as everyone else as he looked at Eliab. His values were the same as the people who looked for a big muscular leader like Saul. A king has to be dignified, commanding, strong doesn't he? No, God looked at the heart and what values the man held were more important than what he could do. What was remarkable that after Saul, that one hadn't registered with Samuel because Saul's disobedience was of the heart.

We live in a society that forces us into its mould so much so that we slip easily into its values. And it happens without us being conscious and aware it's happening. And what is the world based on - outward appearance. Our social standing and status is defined by homes, cars, clothes, wealth. And people who are different? They don't fit. And we've seen a whole generation of children and now our grandchildren slipping into that mire.

Like Samuel who was busy in Ramah with his judging and work for the Lord - and good stuff it was too - we have been busy about preserving the status quo, keeping worship and church going. We've been faithful to what God was doing 50 years ago and that is our desire. But we're not connecting with this generation. We're not communicating with them. Like it or not, we are Samuel's - desiring to be faithful to God, seeing things fall apart but not realising our responsibility in it. It's a kind of denial. By the end of Samuel's judgeship - this rule of a great man of God - we see his sons turned from the Lord and the people rejecting the system and wanting a king. We see many good things about Samuel in scripture, but not in chapters 7 and 16. As we look at the

massive decline of the church in Britain in the last 30 years, whatever we may have celebrated or done that was good doesn't count for anything now as we see the people rejecting God and rejecting His church. It may have worked then, but it obviously doesn't work now.

BUT TO HIS CREDIT

Samuel obeyed. Despite his misgivings, Samuel obeyed God, went to Bethlehem and when he got there, still listened to the voice of God. And what sort of man did he anoint. Well, it was someone who you wouldn't automatically think of as king material. He was the youngest son. He was the one that got the lousy job of looking after the sheep - the most menial task in the family. He was a handsome chap though and later in the chapter we read that he was handy with a weapon. But he played the harp and composed songs. Mmm. Not typical king stuff. But God knew his heart.

Because of Samuel's obedience, a new king was anointed and the rest the say is history. From this point we see a turn around in the history of Israel as David grows and eventually becomes king and by the time of Solomon, the kingdom had risen to its peak.

Why? It all started with Samuel, the prophet who obeyed even though he was in fear of men and lost his perspective. As I've already said this evening, we live in an age where the church seems in massive decline and our expectations are low. But we've got to recognise our position and we need to obey the voice of God.

What does it mean to obey the voice of God. To some it means going back to how things were years ago. We remember it as it was, but forget that it lies at the root of what we have now, whether we like it or not. You don't get a different result by doing the same thing again.

We need to be a people who obey the voice of God and do His will. And in David's case, it meant going down a rocky road of obedience too as we shall see in coming weeks. And in the process he changed and matured

The same is true here in Swaffham. If our desire is to see the church grow and people come to Christ, it is not an impossible path, but it is a path of obedience and a rocky path where we need to follow what God is doing. And that is the road we are embarking upon. As I have suggested in a previous sermon where I quoted from the early part of Joshua - we'll know the way because we haven't been that way before.

I believe we are coming to a crossroads. We have plans to move forward. Doing the same is not a option, and I think most of us realise that. I think that many people were under the impression when I came that the church would grow rapidly and many people would come to Christ straight away. A growing church where people coming to Christ is my vision, but we all need to realise that there is a road to follow. In that we also need to change and mature. That road may be one that is difficult for us but it's the only road we have if we are to move in obedience to God in the commissions that we already have in scripture to go and reach the lost.

