

There's no fool like an old fool 1 Kings 1

We've seen a lot recently in the news about countries who have been changing leadership. Those with totalitarian or hereditary governments often find change traumatic as we have seen in Egypt recently. What they want to avoid is the power vacuum that often occurs when a leader dies or is overthrown without a clear succession. We have seen the chaos that ensued in Middle Eastern countries that have changed leadership over the last few years and that is continuing.

Because of the way our society works, there is rarely a vacuum of political power as regards who is at the top but it does happen from time to time. Forethought usually reduces the problem.

That wasn't true of David's kingdom and his leadership. David was reaching the end of his life. He was about 70. People didn't tend to live that long in those days, so this was a good age, but unlike some of his contemporaries of the same age, David's health was failing. The prescribed treatment for him was strange modern standards – Abishag the Shunemite brought in to wait on him and keep him warm by sharing his bed. The warmth of youth, particularly a virgin, was a common medical practice as it was believed that the vitality of youth would somehow be transferred to him, so this would not have been thought of as unusual or lacking propriety. However we find that she did have the status as a concubine as we shall see in the next chapter.

David was hanging on to power and had not named a successor even though he needed a regent and a clear line of succession. The result of this was to lead to an unnecessary power struggle by two of his sons. What went wrong. Let's take a look and see.

Indecisiveness

But as we find in this chapter, even though as a young man he was decisive in his kingship, as an old man he was unaware of what was going on. In that power vacuum, his old guard, Joab and Abiathar – the leader of the army and the religious community had their own idea of who should be king. Therefore his oldest surviving son Adonijah considered that it was his right to claim kingship and with Joab's support, he did.

However David had intended that Solomon should become king and had promised that to Bathsheba. Solomon was the second of David and Bathsheba's children. The first died because of David's sin in having Uriah killed. It's another of those OT stories where God brings pluses from minuses and as we know, Solomon was destined to become a great king. As a product of David's later life, he was a young man, unlike Adonijah who was probably middle aged.

Solomon was very much a product of the peace that David had brought to the kingdom and had his own supporters who weren't David's old guard who preferred the more handsome and experienced Adonijah.

David knew that what was needed was a different kind of king was needed to build the nation, but it seemed he'd not been decisive enough in doing the right thing. Why? We don't know for sure but what we do know is that David's tendency for unwise decisions did not end with the murder of Uriah. The dealings with his sons and potential successors was equally unwise. Also unwise was his dealings with Joab who we will find as we explore the later chapters of 2 Samuel, had been highly duplicitous. But he was the leader of the army and unlike David was fit. He's been supported by Abiathar and the the upper echelons of society – but not by those closest to David like Zadok, Nathan and Benaiah.

So Joab and Abiathar were the old guard and wouldn't be agents of the change the kingdom needed. But now he was weak, was he afraid to cross them? We don't know. It rather reminds me of North Korea where the leader died and the old generals which were left brokered power so it doesn't matter what the young man who replaced Kim Jong Il may think or do, he can't get by them.

As we shall see in a moment it could well have also been that David had failed to be straight with either of the sons involved with this story and now it was coming to a head because of it.

It's a lesson on being decisive. When we know we should be doing the right thing, do we hesitate. When we know what God's will is for our life, do we act or do we hesitate. Where there's a need we can see that we can fill in the work of God, do we sit and think about it or do we act?

Maybe we are hanging on to something we don't want to let go of? It may be in the church, it may be something in our personal lives we know we should deal with, it may be that emotionally we can't say goodbye to someone we've lost. Maybe dealing with something will be personally painful so we don't do

what we know is the right thing. Our head says something but our heart says another.

Because of David's dithering, Solomon had a mess to clean up which David should have dealt with years earlier. And that said, of course, when David did do the right thing, everybody fell in line with that decision!

But David made a second mistake.

Indulgence

Adonijah was working on a false premise because David had not been straight with him. *5 Now that Absalom was dead, Adonijah, the son of David and Haggith, was the oldest surviving son. He was a very handsome man. David had never reprimanded him about anything, and he was ambitious to be king. He provided for himself chariots, horses, and an escort of fifty men. 6 7 He talked with Joab (whose mother was Zeruah) and with Abiathar the priest, and they agreed to support his cause. 8 But Zadok the priest, Benaiah son of Jehoiada, Nathan the prophet, Shimei, Rei, and David's bodyguards were not on Adonijah's side.*

Adonijah wanted to be king but David had indulged him rather. There was no reprimand. No sense that David had other plans. Other translations put it another way:

And his father had not displeased him at any time in saying, Why hast thou done so? and he also was a very goodly man; and his mother bare him after Absalom. (AV)

6 Now his father, King David, had never disciplined him at any time, even by asking, "Why are you doing that?" Adonijah had been born next after Absalom, and he was very handsome. (NLT)

His father had spoiled him rotten as a child, never once reprimanding him. Besides that, he was very good-looking and the next in line after Absalom. (Message)

There was nothing confrontational between father and son. It's nice that people should live in harmony, but the truth is that David should have been a proper father and been prepared to confront him and question his actions. He was a spoiled and handsome chap and very ambitious, but the implication in the passage is that he was not the material of kingship. He hadn't been honed by David. The edges hadn't been knocked off.

He rather reminds me of Absalom who was also handsome. If we look back into 2 Samuel we find that he was also a ruthless man, determined to take power at all costs. When he was exiled, David was eventually soft enough to take him back even though he was a threat. And it all came back to bite him four years later when he usurped the throne.

One of the things we often don't like doing is crossing someone. It's certainly a Church leader's dilemma. We don't want to offend – so we say nothing. It's also a parent's dilemma, particularly as children move from youth to adulthood. It can be difficult very difficult when they are wanting to do something or are doing something that they are unsuitable for or doing something they really shouldn't. Speaking the truth in love is one of the hardest things in the world.

Yet it is so necessary. So often when words aren't said or actions taken when they should be, the problem festers on and it comes back to bite us. I know. I speak from bitter experience as a Minister.

So has someone offended you? Look at Matthew 18 and deal with it – it's your responsibility. If you come to me because someone has offended or sinned against you expecting me to do something about it; then the first question I'll ask is "have you spoken to them? Have you tried to win them over?" If not I'll send you to them and expect you to deal with it first. Church leaders get involved much later.

The moral of this story is: always be open, be transparent. And definitely always speak the truth in love! *Eph 4:12-17 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

How do we speak the truth in love? Love – agape – is putting the needs of others before our own? So if we are going to speak to someone about some serious matter, how would we like to have the truth spoken to us when we have done something wrong? Firmly, clearly, gently, constructively, helpful, supporting. “How can I help?” Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the words.

We know from this passage that when he did find out the truth: it was a crushing blow to him and he feared for his life, but Solomon spared him provided he stayed loyal. However as we shall find out next time, the damage had already been done and he retained notions of kingship.

Unfairly

David's failure was also grossly unfair to Adonijah. Since the death of Absalom, he would have believed he was next in line for the throne. It was unfair for David to have remained silent on the issue. But David's failings didn't stop with Adonijah. Because he had been so decisive with Adonijah he had also been unfair to Solomon (and Bathsheba) by not dealing with it. In fact when Bathsheba went to see David after Nathan's tip-off, despite her reminder of his promise and her fears for hers and Solomon's life, it needed an intervention from Nathan to kick David into action. His indecisiveness was leading to serious problems. How was he going to be kicked into action. By Nathan. It was Nathan that brought him the word of the Lord when he sinned over Bathsheba. It needed that direct word to jolt him into action and pronounced Solomon king. Once David was reminded of his oath and the prophetic reassurance, then he did the right thing.

But should things have gone this far before David acted? Obviously not. It left Solomon with a transition to power more difficult than it should have been.

It's a good reminder to us that decisions we make, affect other people: even personal ones. I remember talking to someone about their will. They wanted their children to have certain of their personal items but knew that there would be a tussle over them once they were gone. I asked them if they had put that in their will as it was easy to do. They said no – they didn't want to think too hard about death and its consequences.

Whether we like it or not, our decisions affect others whatever area of our lives that we can think of. What's the answer to that? How can we make sure we have all exits covered and know that we've acted properly and fairly. The principle is the same as before – agape – considering the needs of others before our own.

So how do I conclude? We have two kings. David and Solomon. Both of them were wise men – they are responsible for a chunk of the OT. But in their old age – not their youth – they acted in foolish ways that ultimately harmed their kingdom and got people killed. Never see older age as a bulwark against foolishness. It isn't. We should know better because we're more mature and experienced, but the evidence of the Bible, history and life is that it's no protection. We have just as much a propensity for foolishness when we are old as when we are young.

The only protection against that is to realise it and ask God for wisdom daily that we walk with His Spirit and speak and act in love as our Saviour did; and never assume automatically that thinking and doing something is right just because we think we are wise enough to know the answer without committing it to prayer.

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