

2 Samuel 5:1-10

08.07.18

*David's reign*

The name of David - King David - is one that echoes throughout the Bible and in the history of Israel, and indeed the church, and this morning we continue in our series looking at his rise and rule in Israel. Last week we looked at his response to the death of his predecessor, Israel's first king, Saul. Seven years have now passed since then and David has been crowned king of the southern part of the country, the region of Judah. And today we pick up the story as the elders from the northern tribes of Israel come to David at Hebron and they ask him to be their king too, uniting the entire nation.

And before launching into this passage I want to stand back for a moment, and pause and take stock, and ask why all this matters anyway. Why do we immerse ourselves in this ancient story of an ancient king in an ancient world that history has left far behind? Why do we spend weeks wallowing in the depths of the Old Testament? Have we not got better things to talk about?

Well, these are good questions and they prompt me to begin this morning by putting this passage in some sort of wider context. And in order to understand the passage we therefore have to begin by reminding ourselves that God never wanted a king in Israel in the first place, and to begin with they didn't have one. And when Israel foolishly decided that it wanted to be like other nations and have a king like them God warned them. You don't want to go there, said God. Human beings do not handle power well and if you have a king he will tax you and make life hard for you and he will send your sons off to war and the chief beneficiaries will be his cronies, his power elite. And anyway, said God, asking for a king misses out on the whole point of your existence, the reason I established you as a nation in the first place. Israel's whole *raison d'être* was to demonstrate to the world that God is King, God is Lord of the nations and Israel's calling was to bear witness to that and to show the world what it meant to live under the rule of God – how liberating and fulfilling that was. So there was no need for them to have a king – just point to the one

sovereign rule of God! But Israel insisted and so God reluctantly gave way. But God made it clear – your king has no independent authority. He is there as God’s representative, called to direct people to God.

In fact it’s interesting that in our passage this morning there is reluctance to call David king at all. So we note that that in verse 2 of our reading our version of the Bible speaks of David being called by God to be ‘ruler’ over Israel – but the original Hebrew word actually has sense of ‘prince’, a lesser title. In other words the people know that there is only one King and that is God, under whom David is a mere prince!

And, furthermore, just note the way the king’s power is limited and constrained in other ways in this passage. Let’s look again at verse 3 where we read that, ‘King David made a covenant with the elders before the Lord at Hebron.’ Now, what is significant about a covenant is that it is a two-way relationship, one that lays responsibilities and obligations upon both parties. ‘Covenant’ introduces a note of mutual responsibility, of accountability and negotiation. It’s as if the people are introducing safe-guards, saying in effect, ‘and don’t forget this is a covenantal, two-way relationship! You have obligations to us as well as we to you!’ And related to this is the fact that David is portrayed as a shepherd king, and when power and authority are defined in terms of a shepherd you know at once you are dealing with something different from pure naked power. A shepherd always has the wellbeing of the flock at heart and must be prepared to put himself at risk for his flock.

So with that background, we might wonder how God feels about this coronation of David. Granted that God is no fan of human kings, how might the Lord view what is taking place here in the life of Israel? Well, maybe God can be cautiously optimistic. David clearly has the divine seal of approval. His power is limited and constrained, covenantal and shepherd-like. And there is hope that under David Israel might fulfil its vocation. It’s possible that under David Israel might so live that the surrounding nations might be drawn to the true God, which was what they were there for. And here it’s important to note that the period of seven years since the death of Saul has not been a good time in the life of Israel. For a start they were not a united nation: there was a fault-line running through it, dividing north and south. That’s why the south had already

crowned David king before the north gave its assent. But as well as division between north and south, the entire nation had also been riven with political intrigue and assassinations, parties vying for power. Now, with David's coronation, Israel seems to be united and at peace. The whole nation, north and south, recognises David as their bone and flesh and he has succeeded in reconciling feuding parties.

So where is the witness that God yearns for in the world? Where, among the nations of the earth, is Israel's witness to his rule? Well, maybe it's here. Here and now, gathered in Hebron, Israel is ready to fulfil its destiny, testifying to the rule of God among the nations of the earth.

There is, however, something rather worrying, rather concerning in this passage. And it concerns the blind and the lame and David's apparent hostility to them. It seems that after his coronation David decided to take as his capital Jerusalem, a city that was then held by foreigners called the Jebusites. And it seems that in capturing Jerusalem some insults were hurled at David about how even the blind and the lame could resist him, so well-fortified was the city. And that seems to have given David something of a prejudice about the blind and lame. 'The blind and lame shall not come into the house', he says, and that seems to be some kind of exclusion order, banning these people from the temple. And what does that say about the prejudices of power? As so often happens, when human power flexes its muscles, it's the vulnerable who suffer.

In David's coronation therefore we see all the ambiguities of power. We do not handle even limited power well and so we find exclusion and rejection of the powerless. And so God has mixed feelings as he surveys this scene at Hebron. His heart goes out to David, but David is flawed, corrupted by power as he will be even more in days to come. And where is the witness that God yearns for? Where, among the nations of the earth, is Israel's witness to his rule? And if we were to read on we would find prophets looking forward to the day when the disabled and the marginalised will no longer be banished from God's house for all will be gathered in. And in the fullness of time there comes one who finally displays and bears witness to God's rule, God's Kingdom. He takes the title of the good shepherd and he demonstrates the power of

compassion, and he reaches out to the blind and the lame and the outcasts and gathers them in his arms and gently brings them home to God. And as we read from the Gospel, his own people rejected him – especially his home town – for such power is threatening to those who only know worldly power. And we read how he sent his disciples out to bear witness and warned them of rejection too. But here at last, fleetingly, is the witness that God yearns for. Here at last, among the nations of the earth, is Israel's testimony to God's sovereign rule - even as it is rejected.

All of which brings us to this morning – and it does seem that we are going through one of those times when we are particularly aware of a world disfigured by human power and its dynamics. Empires flex their muscles, elites consolidate their power, privileged self-interest breeds division and conflict - we see it all. And as usual it's the vulnerable who suffer most and who often become the scapegoats. Nothing changes. David's world is our day. And we can argue over the causes and the effects and the rights and wrongs and we pray for a more just and peaceful order. But I would suggest to you that the question on God's heart is the same as it's always been: where is the witness that God yearns for? Where, among the nations of the earth, is the witness to his rule? And this, of course, is where you and I come into the picture. Because we, the church, are that place. The Bible describes us in the same terms as it described Israel of old, as the holy nation. As the disciple Peter writes of the church in his letter in the new Testament, 'you are... a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim he might acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.' Here, in us, where Jesus is named and confessed as Lord, and where God is worshipped in word and deed, and where the vulnerable are welcomed and given place, here is the witness for which God yearns.

It seems crazy, doesn't it? Given the scale of the world's problems, given the threats and the turmoil, what difference does a little group of believers make? Why does a little band of pilgrims with very little power at all matter? Why is what we do here this morning so urgent? We can't change much, yet to God this matters hugely. It was what God was yearning for on that day in Hebron. It was what God was yearning for when he sent Jesus to his own people, and when Jesus sent

out his disciples into the towns and villages of Israel. In a conflicted and disfigured world what God yearns for is a community who bear witness in word and deed that it is God and not ultimately human power that rules the world – that Jesus is Lord. And to him be the praise and the glory.  
Amen.