

Homily, St. Andrew's
Sunday, June 7, 2015 - Proper 10B
1 Samuel 8:4-20

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

As we settle into ordinary time today, we begin a journey through the history books of Ancient Israel. The story we hear today from First Samuel marks an important transition in their life... a transition from being a loosely organized tribal society to being a nation governed under kingship.

Before we delve into the story, let me offer some thoughts about the nature of this literature. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are widely understood as one masterful work of history, known as the Deuteronomistic History, with the book of Deuteronomy as a kind of preface. This work tells the history of Ancient Israel but it is not, and was never intended to be, an objective recitation of historical facts. That's not to say that historical realities aren't contained within it... it most certainly includes historical facts... but it remains a work that, as one scholar comments, is a "literary and theological [interpretation] of history, [as] the storytellers make no effort to be objective." (NIB, 1024) Historical biblical literature is neither literally true nor is it "merely" mythical, symbolic or mystical. Rather, historical biblical literature is story-telling at its best, containing historical people and events, sociological information about the nature of the society and theological interpretation about what it all means, written and collected and edited over many decades by more than one person. We can't know for certain the details of this process but there is much we can know and the scholarly work of discernment about what we can and what we cannot know, matters greatly.

With that in mind, let's turn to our reading today from First Samuel and the critical transition it marks in the life of Ancient Israel. Up until this point in Israel's story, there has been no nation, only a loose confederation of tribal groups, governed by a series of judges and prophets, but under the direct rule of Yahweh. Beginning with our story today, however, the transition from this tribal society to a nation ruled by an earthly king gets underway. The story-telling highlights that the transition is both theological and sociopolitical in nature and that its driven by important characters... today, Yahweh and Samuel, and in the chapters to come: Saul and David. What this means is that both the temporal concerns of politics, economics, justice, safety and security and other aspects of societal organization... in other words real, everyday life... AND theological or ideological concerns of beliefs, relationship with God and view of the universe... it all matters... along with the leadership, character and personalities of the people involved. Particularly noticeable today is also how such a major transition involves significant stresses, tension, and conflict on a number of different levels.

Our story today begins with a group of elders approaching Samuel with a request: "appoint for us a king to govern us..." The request is sandwiched between 2 different rationales, both of which temporal in nature. First comes an internal concern for the future leadership: "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways..." The character of Samuel's sons is not viewed as strong enough, or good enough, to lead and the elders fear what will happen when

Samuel dies and so they seek an alternate solution. The second rationale is also temporal in nature, but takes a wider view: “appoint for us a king to govern us...like other nations.” The Israelite tribal confederacy is surrounded by other peoples, they are part of the wider Ancient world, and the elders well aware of the external pressures and dangers. There is also a very natural human desire to be like everyone else... “like other nations” sounds like a large scale version of “keeping up with the Jones.” That said, we’d be remiss to simply dismiss them as unfaithful when there is a real possibility of invasion from neighbours... in this case, it’s the Philistines who are the major threat. There is a huge difference between the men of a small village sharpening their hoes into spears to try to defend against invasion and plunder, and the possibility of a standing army under the centralized leadership of a king. A king ruling a larger community means that through taxation, city walls can be built for protection, there can be greater division of specialized labour, and professional soldiers can be trained and equipped. The desire to be “like other nations” is not flippant... rather, it arises from real need... the elders are recognizing that as the world around them changes, they too need to change or they risk losing everything, even ceasing to be at all.

Samuel is displeased with the request and makes no delay in taking it to Yahweh in prayer. We can only discern the nature of Samuel’s displeasure by Yahweh’s response to a prayer not recorded for the history books. The Lord responds to Samuel by addressing not the temporal concerns but the theological tension in the request: “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.” I’m not sure if we should read Yahweh’s words with a neutral, matter-of-fact voice or with one of petulance and insecurity. Part of me reads it and thinks: “good grief... get over it God! This isn’t about you, it’s about the people’s need for security, prosperity, and leadership!” That said, notice the tension of the theological transition away from Yahweh’s direct leadership in the community as the “king,” with the community guided by the covenant relationship established through Moses: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” As one scholar describes it: “The old traditions of covenant community resisted and came into conflict with the emerging ideology of royal community...” (NIB, 1022)

At any rate, God does get over it and instructs Samuel again to listen to the voice of the people and yet warn them of the temporal realities of what having a king to rule over them means in the real-world. Samuel’s authority as Yahweh’s mouthpiece is apparently secure enough that Samuel’s report to the people of Yahweh’s words is put solely in his mouth. Samuel then goes on for 7 verses to list the ways of a king... ways that may prove to be less beneficial than the people first thought, even edging into being oppressive. He concludes that “you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” The warning, however, falls on deaf ears with the people refusing to listen and “determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” Ultimately, the people want a king to take responsibility for them, to “fight [their] battles,” for apparently defending themselves and governing themselves through the covenant had become untenable.

There is a lot that we can take from this story, particularly when we clearly recognize that we live in a much different world than that of the Ancient Near East. The difference in context between us and those ancient elders makes all the difference in reflecting on what this story can teach us about God, our relationship with God and how we might make decisions. The first thing is to understand that stress, tension and conflict is, and has always been, an integral part of major transitions. Today we hear 2 sides of a debate within a community trying to work out what to do next, how best to be faithful now. We can take solace in knowing that whatever stresses, tensions and conflict we might experience... whether it's here at St. Andrew's or in the wider church... as a community we have been here before, many times. Faithfully, prayerfully, passionately discussing theological issues in relationship to temporal realities is biblical and it is the way forward.

The theological transition in the life of Ancient Israel noted in our story today didn't arise out of a vacuum and neither do the theological tensions of our time arise out of a vacuum. The tribes that made up Ancient Israel were growing, the world around them was changing and they sought to re-organize as a result. Within the church over the centuries, we have more or less lived with the royal model of having a "king"... Father... leader, "to go out before us and fight our battles.." As the church moved with modern times, ministry became more professionalized with the priests being the ministers and the people being the sheep whose responsibility was to follow, to raise money, and to fill a variety of specialized tasks. I'd like to suggest that part of what is happening or what needs to happen, in our time is something akin to a return to tribal organization. In a tribe, leadership is less hierarchical and less centralized with everybody having a key role; there is less security and protection but more freedom and responsibility; governance is not dictated by a "ruler" so much as guided by covenantal relationship amongst the community... and probably a hundred other things.

Our challenge today is to figure out, step by step, what to do next, how best to organize ourselves, how best to be faithful now... given the changes within our community and around us in the world. We need to pay attention not only to our earthly, temporal realities but to what they mean for our beliefs, and our relationship with God. And we can't do this just once but rather through an on-going process of discovery through the tension of conversation and prayer. As we reflect on the successes and failures of our forebears - ancient and modern alike, may we take heart and grow in understanding as we lean into our live of faith together.