

Saul and David: I Samuel 16, vv. 14-23

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When I started to concern myself with the texts appointed as today's readings, and decided to take as my sermon text the passage from the First Book of Samuel that is the appointed Old Testament reading, I thought it must surely be the first time I had preached on a passage from the Old Testament. When I then looked at the Hannover International Worship website and reviewed the history of my sermons, I found that this was nearly true, but not quite. The very first time I preached here, way back in 2005, I took Psalm 91 as my text, and in 2018 I took the story of the Burning Bush from the Book of Exodus, in conjunction with the New Testament story of Jesus' Transfiguration; but that is still only two out of 14 sermons, and the Psalms I would consider to be a special case anyway.

Not long ago someone asked me: Why did the Christian Church take over the Old Testament, which was of course the Jewish Bible, in its scriptures? It was a question I couldn't, on the spur of the moment, find a satisfactory answer to: but one reason is presumably the fact that the earliest Christians had no other Scriptures, that is to say no other record of the Word of God, since the New Testament had not yet been compiled, and much of it was not yet written. Most Christians would certainly consider the New Testament to be the more important part of their Bible, containing as it does the words of Jesus and four accounts of his life, with his life and ministry being perceived as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. So that while one can assume that the stories out of the New Testament I have preached on in the past are familiar to most members of the congregation, that is not necessarily the case with more than a few Old Testament stories such as the Garden of Eden or

Noah's Ark.

One important factor that no doubt contributes to the prominence we accord to the New Testament over the Old Testament today is the difference that many perceive in the nature of God as presented by the two: it is commonly said that the God of the New Testament, as personified in Jesus Christ, is a God of universal love and forgiveness, whereas the God of the Old Testament is vengeful and cruel. This is a widespread perception, but I have never come across any attempt to actually quantify these factors in the two Testaments.

The story told in today's text, like all the best stories, involves two people: Saul and David. Now most people will have a few ideas about David: notably that he was a fine musician and also a poet, to whom the Psalms were traditionally attributed; and that he killed the giant Philistine warrior Goliath in single combat. Most people, I imagine, will know less about Saul; so here is a bit of background.

Saul was from a well-reputed family of the tribe of Benjamin. He is described in I Samuel as "an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites – a head taller than any of the others" [I Sam.9,2]. One day his father sent him out to search for some donkeys that had got lost, and while searching he came to the place where the prophet Samuel lived, the last of the so-called "Judges" who had ruled Israel - some more, some less effectively - during the chaotic period when the tribes of Israel were engaged in taking possession of the land of Canaan and dividing it up between the tribes. The Book of the Judges, which tells their stories, ends with the verse: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" [Jg.21,25]. It is not quite clear to me whether this is intended as a positive or a negative assessment.

The tribes of Israel had at that time not yet merged to form a proper nation; but that they were

heading in that direction can be seen from the fact that in I Samuel the Prophet is repeatedly confronted with by the demand: “We want a king to rule over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles” [I Sam.8,19-20]. Samuel tries to resist those demands, pointing out that Israel’s position was by no means inferior to that of other nations, since they did indeed have a king: God himself: “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I brought Israel up out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and all the kingdoms that oppressed you.’ But you have now rejected your God; and you have said, ‘No, set a king over us’” [I Sam.10,19]. So in the end, the Lord allows Samuel to give the people what they want: “Listen to them and give them a king.” [I Sam.8,22]. The choice falls on Saul, and even Samuel seems satisfied with it: in the course of the process, he anoints Saul, pouring oil on his head as a sign that he is the one chosen by God [I Sam.10,1]. And Samuel says to the people, “Do you see the man the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.” Then the people shouted, “Long live the king!” [I Sam.10,23-24].

The sentence in I Samuel where the author intends to tell us how long Saul reigned over Israel [I Sam.13,1] is defective; but he was clearly king for many years. In the earlier part of his reign, he seems to have fulfilled the expectations that the people had had when they demanded that Samuel should give them a king. As a military leader he brought the first successes against Israel’s perpetual enemies, the Philistines: “After Saul had assumed rule over Israel, he fought against their enemies on every side, [...] delivering Israel from the hands of those who had plundered them” [I Sam.14,47-48]). Although he was never able to conquer the Philistines conclusively (“All the days of Saul there was bitter war with the Philistines”, it says in I Samuel [I Sam.14,52]); he was recognised as being a man that “the Spirit of God came upon in power” [I Sam.10,10]. But he was also a man with a mind of his own, who on occasions deliberately ignored what the prophet Samuel told him was the will of God – notably, how they should

treat defeated enemies such as the Amalekites and their king, instead sticking to what he himself thought was best. He even defends himself when Samuel rebukes him – indeed, Saul even actually claims to have fulfilled God’s command when it is clear that in fact he has not. “I have carried out the Lord’s instructions”, Saul says to Samuel [I Sam.15,13], but Samuel replies “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears?” [I Sam.15,14], for God’s instruction was that the Amalekites and all their possessions, including their livestock, should be totally destroyed. Saul then makes the excuse that the best of the sheep and cattle have been kept to sacrifice to the Lord; thus earning himself the reproach from Samuel: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.” [I Sam.15,22]. This verse is very close to that from the prophet Hosea which Jesus quotes, as reported in Matthew’s gospel: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” [Hos.6,6; Matt.12,7]. Thus not only Samuel was disappointed with Saul, but so also, according to the account in I Samuel, was the Lord himself: “I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions” [I Sam.15,11;15,5]. And so God regrets his choice, declaring through Samuel that he has rejected Saul and his descendants as rulers of Israel, and that they will be replaced by the House of Jesse in the person of David, whom Samuel then anoints as he had previously anointed Saul.

Later in his reign - and here I come at last to the part of the story that provided our first reading this morning - Saul appears to be suffering from bipolar disorder – or what used to be called manic depression. The account we heard in the First Reading says: “Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.” [I Sam.16,14]. The fascinating thing about this sentence is that both of the Spirits that possessed Saul, the first that had made him a powerful and

admired king, and the second which now is now weakening him and presumably rendering him practically incapable of ruling, are described as being “from the Lord”. The second, it is true, is an *evil* spirit from the Lord, but the text nevertheless insists it does come from the Lord, and not from the Devil or any other kingdom of evil.

When I was preparing this sermon, I found a commentary on this chapter that started with a rather aggressive declaration by the author that he did not believe in a cosmos that was divided between God and the Devil, but in one where God’s rule of Love held unrivalled ascendancy, so that there was no room in it for any such thing as an evil Spirit. It seemed to me that this author had missed the point of what I Samuel is trying to express: namely the paradox that this influence on Saul, though clearly negative – the spirit is said to be “evil” and to be “tormenting” him [I Sam.16,15] – is nevertheless one that Saul’s attendants themselves recognise as serving the purposes of God, and not the Adversary: it comes from the Lord, not from the Devil.

And so it occurs to them that what Saul needs is what we would today call “music therapy”. As the Covid pandemic hopefully draws to its end and we can look forward again to the regular enjoyment of concerts and musical events, we can certainly sympathise with this view. An outstanding harpist is sought, and found in David, the youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem. But it is notable that David is not only a fine musician: he is also “a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the Lord is with him” [I Sam.16,18]. It will be this last quality – in Samuel’s words, “the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people” [I Sam.13,14] – that will lead to David, the Lord’s new anointed, displacing Saul from the throne and taking his place, as the person that all Israel would remember down the centuries as their greatest king, indeed perhaps as their only great king.

The expression “music therapy” does not, of course, appear in the biblical story; but anyone hearing the narration for the first time is almost certain to think of the expression. This must surely be one of the oldest reports of something we can call by that name. Saul’s counsellors are concerned about his obvious depression. The royal doctors are apparently not able to do anything to counter it. But the counsellors have an idea as to what would help: music. Whether they had had any experience of such a thing before, we do not know. We get the impression, however, that the effect music could have on a soul weighed down by melancholy and depression was something they were somehow familiar with. Apart from anything else, they would scarcely have dared to suggest it to the king if they had not had a pretty good idea that it could prove effective. And the king agrees to “give it a try”. David is sent for, and brings his harp, and plays when the “evil spirit from God” comes over Saul. One can imagine the kind of music that David plays. Even though the king’s counsellors describe David as being a “warrior” as well as a musician, there will be nothing militaristic about it. It will be quiet, gentle, lyrical music, that appeals to the heart and to the soul; consoling music like the music a mother plays or sings to her young child, to get it to go to sleep. Indeed, precisely the kind of music that any mention of a harp conjures up in our minds. And the king clearly takes a liking to the young man. He is touched not only by his music, but by his youthful beauty as well. Saul sends a message to David’s father Jesse, saying “Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him” [I Sam.16,22-23]; he takes David into the inner circle of his closest advisers, even making him “one of his armour-bearers” [I Sam.16,21]: As I find it difficult to imagine David actually carrying Saul’s armour or weapons, I take this to be probably an honorary title conferred on David as a sign of the king’s favour rather than actually describing the nature of the service he performed. “Whenever the [evil] spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the

evil spirit would leave him.” [1 Sam.16,23].

And yet: Although in the short term David’s music seems to drive away the “evil spirit from God” that is oppressing Saul, after a time David’s music therapy apparently loses its power. Saul’s attitude towards David develops from admiration into jealousy and even fear. Saul has been a mighty and successful leader in the campaigns against the Philistines; but David, who is of course the younger man, is even more successful, and what is more important, he is recognised as being so by the people, especially after his victory over Goliath; as they rejoice over the victory, they dance and sing: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” [1 Sam.18,7] – I don’t think these figures are to be taken literally, but it is clear what they mean: not only as a musician but even as an army commander, David is ten times more successful than Saul. “What more can he get but the kingdom?”, Saul asks himself, “and from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David” [1 Sam.18,8]. It was probably just as well for David that Saul did not yet know that David has already been anointed by Samuel as the future king, just as he himself had been anointed in advance of his actually being made king by the people: so that it is clear that from now on, while Saul may still sit on the throne, the Spirit of the Lord has departed from him, and is now with David. Nevertheless, in the following chapters, there still appears to be an involuntary symbiosis between Saul and David. David remains close to Saul for as long it appears to be safe to do so, and even marries a daughter of Saul’s. And then: “An evil spirit from the Lord came upon Saul as he was sitting in his house with his spear in his hand. While David was playing the harp, Saul tried to pin him to the wall with his spear, but David eluded him and Saul drove the spear into the wall. That night David made good his escape.” [1 Sam.19,9-11]

I decided to focus this sermon on putting today’s first reading into context,

since the reading, taken by itself, is only a fragment out of the story of David and Saul, and I wonder

how many people nowadays concern themselves very much with the Books of Samuel and the Books of the Kings. In the course of the story we have encountered two spirits that play a role in it: on the one hand “the Spirit of the Lord”; and on the other hand, “an evil spirit from the Lord”. As I suggested above, we can take these designations as a warning not to ascribe everything that appears superficially good to God and everything that appears superficially evil to devilish powers. I am glad that the first of these two spirits is labelled simply as a “Spirit of the Lord”, and nowhere as “a *good* spirit from the Lord”: that really would be a trivialisation of the spirit world, bringing it down to the level of fairies and gnomes, rather than that of angels and messengers of God. And it would leave out of account the phenomenon we so often observe, of things that initially appear evil, but which turn out to have good consequences in the long term, so that we are able to maintain, with a good conscience, that God’s world is a good world, and that everything in it and that happens in it is under his benevolent sovereignty and government.

In three weeks’ time we will be celebrating Pentecost, or Whit, as it is generally called in English: the festival of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit of God on the first group of Christians, who were thereby able to put aside the fear that had paralysed them since the Crucifixion, and began to fulfil their mission to preach the Gospel and make Christ known to the world. The first disciples were no more perfect than David was. But taking David’s career and his personality as a whole, what stands out about him for me is his constant trust in and reliance on the Lord. David and his doings may well have seemed to his contemporaries to have the qualities of a “rushing mighty wind”, as the Holy Spirit felt to the disciples on the Day of Pentecost: may we be prepared to listen to its rushing, and perceive the divine power that it expresses.