

Reflection for Pentecost 8 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Those who use daily prayer will be aware that the Scottish Episcopal Church has a calendar, and throughout the year we are encouraged to reflect on particular characters, their lives and ministry. These are often New Testament characters such as Peter, Paul Andrew or Matthew, but on other occasions they are figures from church history Francis of Assisi (4th October) & Finnbar of Caithness (25th September). The last General Synod added Jane Haining (17th July) to that list.

For those not familiar with Jane Haining's story, she was born in Dumfries and Galloway, lived in Glasgow and felt called as a Church of Scotland Missionary in Budapest, Hungary. Her mission work was caring for Jewish children. At the outbreak of World War II, she was asked to return to Scotland but refused. She was subsequently arrested and transported to Auschwitz having refused to abandon the children in her charge. She is the only Scot known to have died in Auschwitz.

Rarely do we stop, look back and reflect on characters from the Old Testament, but our Old Testament reading from 2 Samuel highlights Nathan.

Who was Nathan and what do we know of his life?

Nathan is a prophet who ministers during the time of King David, and their lives are intertwined with Nathan being a man who is not afraid to bring God's message to the King, even when that message is uncomfortable and challenging for David to hear. One example of this is today's reading.

David's position as king has been established, Jerusalem has become his capital; a palace has been built. Now David draws up plans to build a temple.

Behind that plan, thought, is the question of motive; what is it that drives David's plan? His piety and a desire to do something for God, who has so richly blessed him, despite his failings? Or is there an element of self-legitimation: put a temple in the capital and David consolidates his control over the kingdom still further? Is David using God for political purposes? Is he, in a sense putting God into a box both literally and figuratively?

It is during this planning process that Nathan comes into the scene: and what God must do, through the prophet, is remind David who exactly is in control - God! God will not be confined to one place or one temple. God is a God who moves with his people in his own way and timing. David does not need to build a temple to have God's presence with him. Instead, he just has to trust in God's promises: "Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established forever."

David wanted to use God for his own ends and at times, we do the same. We want a God who does not challenge us or ask us awkward questions. How often do we prefer a God who acts like a crutch when we need him? But a God who makes us uncomfortable, we may not be so keen on. Nathan is the mouthpiece of God – bringing God's challenge. In the end, David is prevented from building the temple; instead, he learns about the nature of God. There is another occasion where Nathan has to stop David and challenge him. On this occasion it is with a strong rebuke that makes David repent for effectively murdering Uriah, so that he could satisfy his desire for Bathsheba, Uriah's wife.

On this occasion Nathan uses what could best be described as a parable - the story of two men, living in the same town. One is rich and has everything, the other poor. He paints a vivid almost poetical picture of the poor man who had nothing but this one lamb: a lamb who was fed at his own table and lived like a treasured daughter.

The rich man needs lunch, but he does not want to kill his own sheep, even though he has

many. He wants to offer hospitality, but not at his own expense. Coldly and callously the rich man takes the one lamb the poor man has and offers it to his guests as a meal. When David hears the story his sense of justice aroused, and he looks to condemn the rich man, only for Nathan to turn the spotlight right back on him.

For Nathan to challenge the king in this way is, to put it mildly, dangerous. To point the finger directly at King David many well have been like trying to go through a solid wall of resistance as a cynical and desperate man tried to cover his tracks. Again, it reminds us that bringing God's message may not always be easy or welcomed.

So often saying nothing is the easy way out, the way of least resistance. I am reminded of the saying "all it needs for evil to flourish is that good people do nothing". As good a King as David was, the act of taking Bathsheba was a clear sign that power was changing him, and not for the better. He had to understand that he was still accountable to God for his actions. For us, being God's prophetic people may involve the same; bringing a message that may not always be welcome or wanted and, at times, may be uncomfortable to give. But we need to be prepared to challenge where challenge is needed.

Look around the world and we see so many examples of power covering up or trying to cover up the truth; we see so many situations of greed, ignoring or trampling on the needs of the poor and the innocent. How often do we speak out?

It would be unfair on Nathan to only see him as the bringer of God's judgment. Clearly, he is someone King David trusts and respects because as the end of King David's life draws close, it is to Nathan that the king looks to ensure a smooth transition to his son Solomon.

King David said, "Call in Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet and Benaiah son of Jehoiada." When they came before the king, he said to them: "Take your lord's servants with you and set Solomon my son on my own mule and take him down to Gihon. There shall Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoints him king over Israel. Blow the trumpet and shout, 'Long live King Solomon!'

What then does Nathan's story say to us?

- That being prophetic, bringing God's word, is not always comfortable. The challenge of God is not always welcomed, but must be heard.
- We need to be clear where our primary loyalty lies. It would have been easy for Nathan to be first and foremost loyal to David to bring the message David wanted to hear; but no, he was first and foremost loyal to God.
- Different roles for different people. Nathan was called be God's voice – challenging, questioning, looking to see God's plan go forward. David was called to establish the kingdom; he was to go no further; it was not his role to build the temple. Solomon was to build on the foundations David had laid. Each of us is called our specific role in God's much greater plan.