

Reflection for Lent 4 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

"When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses."

As today's Old Testament reading begins a new era was dawning for the Israelite nation. In anointing the young David to be king, Samuel was signaling the rise of a man who would ultimately, in the nations history, stand head and shoulders above most of those who would follow. He would establish a single unified kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital for the first time, and he would lay the foundations upon which King Solomon would build in the next generation.

Today though, I do not want to think so much about the history of Israel but rather about the man himself - King David, his character, and his journey with God; because, in looking at him, we can gain so many insights into our own walk with God.

The first and in some ways most important point: David does not volunteer to be King, he is chosen by God. In fact he is not even present at the beginning of the selection procedure. Long before David hears or responds, he has been selected by God and that at the point of calling he is not what would appear to be the natural choice. A boy looking after the family sheep.

"Go to Bethlehem," says God to Samuel "to a man named Jesse, because I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

"When Samuel saw Eliab he said to himself, "This man standing here in the Lord's presence is surely the one he has chosen." But the Lord said to him, "Pay no attention to how tall and handsome he is. I have rejected him, because I do not judge as people judge. They look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart."

God sees, knows and starts to mould us as individuals well before we are aware of his intent or are prepared to accept it: he looks at the potential, but not in terms of the physical, rather in terms of the spiritual - what we can be with his hand guiding, rather than what we are able to be on our own. Why? So that ultimately it cannot be seen as you or me at work, but rather God at work in us and through us.

Secondly, when David is chosen he is still raw, young and a rough diamond. He has much to learn - he will make many a mistake but he can grow, learn and be nurtured, with God's spirit at work within him. What did Samuel see as he looked at the boy *"a handsome, healthy young man, and his eyes sparkled. The Lord said to Samuel, "This is the one—anooint him!"... Immediately the spirit of the Lord took control of David and was with him from that day on."*

The same should be true within our church life. Tomorrow's church leaders, be they priestly or lay, do not just appear - they have to be sought out well before service begins. And having been sought out, they then need to be nurtured in ways that will help them to grow in ability, strength and understanding of the faith.

For David his time as King was not to commence for many a year, time in which he had much to learn, years in which he was to serve and then be hunted by King Saul, but also years during which he would prepare himself for the main task God had in store for him.

Look at his list of jobs and the diversity is fascinating. Shepherd, Musician, Courtier, Soldier, and Out-Law. Each taught him lessons that would prove invaluable when king. But as you look at that list, few if any could be seen as training direct from God, in a religious sense, rather God working through other agencies - even a spear flying in David's direction from the hand of King Saul.

The same is true in our own day, God works his preparation for service not only through the church, but also through others who may have no idea that they are part of God's plan. In my own personal faith journey, time spent in technical training and in seeing my own faith grow within a local church were key elements in my development, although at the time I may well have argued to the contrary.

The same is true for lay roles within the church; skills such as accounting, secretarial work, musicianship are often learnt elsewhere and then used in the service of God. Yet how often do we think of ministry only in terms of areas that the church offers training and development? God's training field is much wider than that and has much to offer.

The other thing I love about David is that, despite who he was - God's anointed king through whom God did great things - he was never perfect. Flaws in his nature and his behavior were still there and not ignored by God. Is that not true of all of us? Each of us fail, each of us makes mistakes however good a Christian we be. That does not mean God rejects us, rather he still loves us and does not walk away.

For David, his area of weakness lay in his personal life and his relationship with his family. His lust for a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, led him to steal what was not his - another man's wife, and even to arrange what could only be described as his murder. Then there was his inability to control and organize his family. The nation and the army was one thing but his own family quite another: a failure in character that was to lead to the death of one of his sons and to civil war.

Yet this is the man to whom a good few of the Psalms are attributed, the man who, right through his life, worshiped God.

We are not and will not be perfect this side of heaven. Yet we can, like David, serve God.

If the story of David teaches us anything it is that God walks with us through our lives. He is there in many cases before we are, shaping, directing, setting the way ahead; providing the very strength we need to take the next step. The path God sets may not always be easy, yet it is a road that can build us into more effective witnesses, if only we will allow that to happen. It is also a road that we do not always want to stay on, as our sin and our own desires get in the way, but each time we come back, God is still there.

Let me close by recalling one of David's psalms that sums God's relationship with us so well –
Psalm 23

*The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.
He shall refresh my soul and guide me
in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
O God, our sovereign and shepherd,
who brought again your Son Jesus Christ
from the valley of death,
comfort us with your protecting presence
and your angels of goodness and love,
that we also may come home
and dwell with him in your house for ever.*