

## PENTECOST 2

6<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2021

Hebrew Scriptures: 1 Samuel 8. 1-20  
Psalm 33. 11-21  
Gospel: Mark 3. 13-15, 19b- 35

*Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve,*

*... as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’* Joshua to the leaders of Israel

Throughout both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures there is a challenge to choose. Choose the way toward life or the way toward death; choose the narrow path that leads to life or the broad path which leads away from it. This challenge comes from the God who chooses Israel, who makes covenant with them and calls them to be his people and for them to abide in his steadfast love. Jesus also calls us to choose. And in today’s Gospel he chooses a new kin, over his family of birth – a family who think he has lost his mind and eschewed ‘family values’.

For the first few years of my primary schooling, we still marked Empire Day. Then this stopped, why I’m not sure. As a child, I wondered why, because it was a good reason be able to let off firecrackers. Maybe it was because the British stopped buying our butter. I have a sense that the world I was born into inhabited the tail end of the British Empire. The memorial tablets in our churches are testament to our citizenship of that vision. To God, King and country.

But the honour boards and memorial windows I sat under as a child, and on which my eyes rested in my church-induced boredom, are challenged by the words of Samuel to the elders of Israel:

A king will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots;

and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.

He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers.

He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.

He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work.

He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

This week we began a new study series in the Ormond Learning HUB. Together the fifteen of us will look at the New Testament over twelve weeks of classes. There were lots of engaging questions people brought to the first night – hoping to be able to engage these together. One of the things we thought about on this first night were the questions: how do we read scripture and from where do we read it? Over the past decades we have been encouraged in various ways to be a bit more conscious about how we read and consider what we have been told. An example of

this shift would be the way we are being invited to re-read the history of the settlement of Australia. If Australia was not *terra nullius* when the British arrived what does that say about the 240-year long European presence here? It means the European presence here can be read as invasion, rather than as us simply occupying a land where no one happened to live. The history most of us were taught was a history which portrayed occupation of the Australian land mass as benign, rather than malign. We need to rethink our selves in light of this reading. This awareness is something we who are affluent, secure and middle class need to bring to the way we read scripture. It is helpful to bring this kind of curiousness to the reading from Samuel and the elders' desire to have a king, like the other nations.

As subjects of the British Empire, we seemed to think that kings (and Queens – *I did but see her passing by ...*) were, in the main, a good thing. Our peculiar unwillingness to become a republic is sign that we are, like the elders of Israel, quite attached to the idea of monarchy. Prince Phillip is reputed to have said about Australians when the 1999 Referendum to become a republic failed: *What is wrong with those people?*

The two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw young Australian men and women go off to fight for God, King and Country. Tens of thousand were killed and countless more wounded and permanently disabled in body and soul by these wars. The prophet Samuel would not be surprised. And we enlisted God in these projects. Squabbling European cousins, George, Wilhelm and Nicholas, sending their young to the slaughter. Trouble was that each side enlisted God in their efforts and invoked the name of God over their “glorious dead”. This is what kings do, Samuel would say. This is what all centralised governments do from time to time.

The church was, in the main, tame in this project. I do recall, though, stories of the victimisation of conscientious objectors during the wars, the disdain for Archbishop Daniel Mannix's vocal resistance to conscription in during WWI. But in the main we fell into line because, we thought, it was good to have a king. To look more honestly to the arc of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and to God's objection to the kind of carnage that all kinds of human leadership leads to, requires us to read with our eyes open. Part of the vision and drive to protect the modern state of Israel is to restore the Israel established by King David – at all costs. We can see what a scandal this is in the recent events there.

As Jesus' ministry begins in Mark, we find him proclaiming the kingdom to the crowds and healing them. These are the people considered to be the discards of society, the ones who can fall through the cracks, the canon-fodder of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Jesus shows God's heart to these people and calls them kin. Confrontingly, for those who think that church is about family, he asks: who is my mother, who are my brothers and sisters? This is no tame Messiah but one who challenges us to the core about our systems of power and identity and belonging, from family all the way to nation.

The German-American theologian Paul Tillich describes faith as the matter of our ultimate concern. It takes time for us to work out what is this matter of ultimate concern in our lives – what gives life to us and what keeps life in a strangle hold. Only as the vagaries of life impose themselves on us are we cajoled or forced to work this out. While we might like to think it is God, often when we find ourselves under stress, we find that some matter of secondary importance actually holds our primary focus; or maybe that our image of God is really rather petty. If we are shaken out of our slumber to wakefulness, we may have the presence of mind to choose, to

make a choice. Maybe we were unaware because someone else had given us our system of loyalty: family, job, institution of which we were a part, nation. But we find ourselves at a crossroads, left with the question to choose this day whom you will serve.

As God says to Samuel, don't worry, they haven't rejected you but me. Most often as humans we are a bit slow on the uptake on these things, especially when it comes to us collectively. But God is patient and infinitely merciful and holds to the divine side of the covenant – until we are ready. The psalmist knew this:

Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,  
on those who hope in his steadfast love,  
to deliver their soul from death,

So, we go on in humility and trust, knowing that God holds the key to life for us and will allow us to open the treasures of his love and mercy, time and again.

Our soul waits for the Lord;  
he is our help and shield.  
Our heart is glad in him,  
because we trust in his holy name.

Andrew Boyle