Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 17th November 2024

Readings: *1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Psalm 18; Mark 13:1-8*

The second Sunday before Advent

Editors are important and influential. No journal is complete without someone to coordinate and shape its content. Witness *Place Matters*, this Church's monthly journal, expertly curated by Tim, with his colleague, Ann.

Nor should we underestimate the significance of editorial work in the Bible as we have it. The writers have a purpose, a message they wish to convey; editing ensures that message is conveyed as they wish. The Bible's authors often write in teams; editors ensure a coherence to their combined efforts.

Today's two passages from the Old Testament are a case in point, and suggest a skilful editorial hand. It seems they want readers to understand something about how society is best ordered for the good of the people and the glory of God. What we heard from the first Chapter of I Samuel introduces us to the birth of Hannah's child, but it is the beginning of the account of how monarchy comes to Israel. In Israel's history, Samuel is a key player, variously a seer, a priest, a judge, a prophet, and military leader. But supremely, he's a king maker. We learn of how he is begged to let the people have a king like other nations do. Samuel's initial reluctance, his eventual capitulation, and the reigns of Saul and then David are then recorded with care. By the time we reach the end of II Samuel – probably a separate volume solely because of the size of the scrolls upon which original texts were written – we are left wondering whether monarchy is a real blessing for Israel; yes or no. Philip Satterthwaite suggests that the answer to that is, 'yes, it is good when the monarch is someone like the obedient David and no, if they are like David when he abuses power'. [1] That we might entertain this fundamental question about how societies best order themselves the editors have used the two volumes of Samuel to offer a narrative that builds towards David's reign. As Robert Alter has it: 'The story of David is probably the greatest single narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, the impulses of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh. It also provides the most unflinching insight into the cruel processes of history and into human behaviour warped by the pursuit of power.' [2]

The purposeful editors of Samuel's birth narrative use it like the opening scene to a saga that eventually culminates in David's life. He is presented as the one who has been nurtured from shepherding toward kingship, who exercises both confident control and kind compassion, who rules with intelligence yet also with intrigue, who knows life's many loves – for sheep, for a friend, for women, for Mephibosheth living with a life-shaping disability, for the nation, and for the nation's God, and who, because of those loves, is capable both of sublime affection, and of hideously betraying his lover's husband.

As we read this story, the editors' hands are clear to see. For example, there's the use of dialogue that helpfully amplifies and explains history but can scarcely be known, let alone be accurate in a verbatim sense; and there's also the addition of fictional detail, less to fabricate history than to understand it. [3]

Looking into our own generation, might we not find in this David Story a paradigm of what is going on around us and within us? I think of political leadership across the globe, a cocktail of the selflessly responsible, the reckless, and the downright reprehensible. I think of religious gurus who model profound spiritual maturity and prophetic acuity shot through with blind spots, flawed judgment, and the sheer panic of an ecclesiastical rabbit with headlights in its eyes. I think of myself: stuff to be proud of, and stuff I wish wasn't part of my story. Nestling at the very heart of David's story as our editors give it to us is the fabulous truth that somehow – I don't need to know how, but somehow - God takes not paragons of virtue but ordinary shepherd-like specimens of humanity and works out the divine purpose through them. And so it remains. There is neither need nor justification for saying we are not

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[1] Satterthwaite, P. E. 2000 *Samuel* in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* ed. T. D. Alexander and Brian S Rosner Leicester: IVP page 182

[2] Alter, Robert 1999 *The David Story: a translation with commentary of I and II Samuel* New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc page ix

[3] cf Alter page xviii

good enough to serve God's mission in today's world. Quite apart from the fact that the perfect are unbearable to live with, and even harder to work alongside, actually almost always God uses the ordinary and blemished ones rather than impossibly perfect, frail earthenware vessels [4] rather than exotic and expensive Ming vases. Such is the message of the editors of I and II Samuel. As a contemporary song has it, 'Jesus, take me as I am; I can come no other way.' [5]

But these editors did something else. You will recall how after the reading from I Samuel chapter 1, we sang a metrical version of I Samuel chapter 2 – Hannah's song. [6] What we didn't do, however, was to go to the end of this sequence of Samuel, Saul and David stories in I and II Samuel. There in II Samuel 22 we find another song, this time put into the mouth of King David, his so-called Song of Thanksgiving. In truth, it is remarkably like psalm 18, which maybe another witness to editors at work.

My real point, though, is that such is the refining work of the editors that they bookend this astounding piece of king-making narrative with 'songs' that tell of first Hannah's and then David's sense of what really matters. The two songs have some remarkable synergy. Here are just three ideas that they hold in common:

First, both Hannah – once barren but now child-bearing – and David – so complex a character, with so mixed a reputation - express their *gratitude* to God. It's not because of the material things nor of the political status that God's given them but because God is utterly, reliably, steadfastly there for them. For Hannah the Lord is a Rock, and for David both a rock and fortress, a crag and a bulwark.

Secondly, both the middle-aged wife and the long-in-the-tooth king are well aware of God's *judgement*. God might be merciful, but God is neither naïve nor so blindly devoted to the individual that the common good is ill served by not holding us accountable when it is required. As Hannah helped us sing, 'God knows all thoughts and motives, and weighs all things in truth.'

And thirdly, the poems of both Hannah and David acknowledge the Lord's *commitment to the poor and lowly.* As Alter has it, Hannah's song sings of 'God's power to reverse fortunes, plunging the high to the depths and exalting the lowly'. [7]

As we ponder our world, where monarch-making seems to occur almost on a monthly basis, though normally through ballot boxes that elect more frequently than bishops who anoint, we soon become aware of the frailty and fragility of human leadership. It's rarely that Ming vase. Nor is the highest profile religious leadership exempt. Moreover, none of this needs to be about passing the buck to others. Our own lives need examining, ever so aware that when I point one finger at you, I leave three pointing back at me. So, whatever the editors intended to offer us as a wise word for ordering of society, it's probably a prescient one for the ordering of our own lives, too.

We, too – nations and churches and households - do well to allow the narratives of our stories to be bookended with reflective 'songs' just like the editors of I and II Samuel put into the mouths of Hannah and David. And we can do worse than to echo their themes: **gratitude** for God's goodness, at once a rock-like fortress *and* like a golden thread through the dulling greys and vivid rainbows of our life's tapestry, **willingness** to be judged for our flaws and failings, even as we rejoice in the wideness of God's mercy, that whatever price we may need to pay for justice to be seen to be done, the repented sin is a forgiven sin; and **commitment to justice** for everyone, equally and always.

Devotee of hymns that I am, I find myself wondering what hymns might bookend the story of my life. I suspect at one end it might be

> Through all the changing scenes of life**,**
> in trouble and in joy,
> the praises of my God shall still
> my heart and tongue employ. [8]

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[4] cf II Corinthians 4.7
[5] Bryant, Dave, from the eponymous song, MP 382
[6] *My heart exults in you, Lord,* from *Singing God's Psalms* (2016) by Fred R. Anderson 1941
[7] Alter, page 9
[8] From the eponymous hymn by N. Tate (1652-1715) and N. Brady (1659-1726) *New Version,* 1696 Rejoice & Sing 685, verse 1

And what about us as a nation, hearing of wars and rumours of wars, and of a hundred other 'earthquakes' to feed our anxiety – what songs might helpfully bookend the telling of our story? If I was the editor, I would be hard pressed to better Timothy Rees:

> God is love: and though with blindness
> sin afflicts and clouds the will,
> God's eternal loving-kindness
> holds us fast and guides us still.
> Sin and death and hell shall never
> o'er us final triumph gain;
> God is love, so Love for ever
> o'er the universe must reign. [9]

What would your choices be, for songs to bookend your life, as you take your place in the world?

As stories continue to be written – the story of God's grace, and the story of this world at once both grievous and glorious – may those bookends forever point us to the one who died that we might live, to whom alone be the glory. Amen.

N. P. Uden

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[9] From the eponymous hymn by Timothy Rees 1874-1939 Rejoice & Sing 95, verse 1