

First Reading *1 Samuel 15.34 - 16.13*

³⁴Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul.

³⁵Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

¹The LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' ²Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the LORD said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the LORD."' ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' ⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' ⁵He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the LORD.' ⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.' ⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.' ⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.' ¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The LORD has not chosen any of these.' ¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' ¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' ¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the

presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Gospel Reading: *Mark 4.26-34*

Such a large crowd gathered around Jesus that he got into a boat and began to teach them using many parables. ²⁶Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

³⁰Jesus also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.' ³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Sermon preached at Old Alresford & Ovington Trinity 2 2021

Isaiah 43: 19 Thus says the Lord: I am about to do a new thing”

Although the prophet Samuel had deep reservations, it had started off relatively well. When they chose the first king of Israel the choice fell on a physically tall and attractive man called Saul. Traditionally God had been the King of the Israelites, but they wanted to be like all the other nations around them and have a king. God told Samuel to go along with the suggestion and so Saul was chosen and he was everything you might expect of a king.

*So there is a big question: why did God reject Saul? The Old Testament does not give us much of a clue. In what seems a very short time in 1 Samuel Saul goes from being the chosen king to being the one who is rejected by God. It is very mystifying.

*The only explanation we are given is that, on one occasion, Samuel was due to come and lead a sacrifice. He was delayed, as prophets could be, and in his absence Saul took over and earned himself a stinging rebuke. In a reversal to the usual order, a politician was accused of dabbling in religion! Those who note the later signs of madness in Saul may wonder if that had anything to do with it.

*But the bald fact is that in this morning’s Old Testament reading God makes a new beginning by having Samuel anoint David as King over Israel, and that long before Saul was dead. In God’s eyes he had already had his day. God was doing what Isaiah 43:19 reminds us that God is always doing “I am about to do a new thing” says the Lord.

In our Gospel reading this morning in Mark’s Gospel Jesus gives us two pictures to think about. What Jesus had to teach has always been very accessible because he taught in pictures and stories. He taught in community spaces, in the market square or in a desert area, and he really had to grab the attention of those to whom he spoke: usually a crowd of people with no great record of understanding great speeches.

*So today we are given two pictures by Jesus. He is explaining to the crowd how the Kingdom of God will come among them. God had left his people when they went into exile in Babylon. When they had returned there was a sense in which he did not return with them – and they were waiting for him in eagerness. That is why they responded so readily to John the Baptist. So Jesus is describing the return of the King, God’s return to his people.

*It won’t be straightforward Jesus is telling people. These two pictures that he gives the crowd are both about growth. The first is about the way in which crops grow in our fields. The growth takes place secretly – a lot of the time we only notice when the crop has suddenly grown. The second story is about the way in which only a tiny beginning can lead to great things. A tiny seed becomes a tree which is home to the birds. These are two very hopeful pictures.

*But they also contain a warning. Everyone knew when the Roman Emperor was coming – heralds and outriders made sure of that. Jesus is warning the people to think differently. There will be no outriders, no heralds. There will be exponential growth but it will be in secret. In other words, Jesus is saying, learn to look for things in a different way – God has his own way of doing things.

We can all understand why there was a 16 month gap between the Queen acceding to the throne and her coronation. There were a great many arrangements to be made, plenty of notice had to be given to very busy people. But what do we make of David's anointing. It is clear that he is only a boy. It will be some time before he can adopt a kingly role. So why has Samuel anointed David at this time?

*The background to this story is the invasion by the Philistines and their challenge to the Israelite people. Israel was not really making any headway against them, even with their new king. The hope is that the choice of David as their next king will announce a new age. Israel needs a national hero and, for some reason, Saul does not have that charisma.

*In other words, God is doing a new thing. In the prophecy of Isaiah from which I take a text this morning, God tells the Israelites that he will be doing a new thing among them. They are in exile. They want to go home. And Isaiah's message is that, yes – they will go home. But, at the same time, God is going to do a new thing and they will have another role to play. It is a message that is replicated in Ezekiel and in Jeremiah who also speak of new things that God will do.

*And, indeed, David does fulfil the promise of his early anointing. It is under David's leadership that the Philistines are gradually defeated and lose their grip on Israel. It is in David's reign that the city of Jerusalem is captured and that Israel has a capital city for the first time. After being an organisation of 12 tribes Israel gradually becomes a nation under King David and God has indeed done a new thing as the prophets had promised.

If you tell people that “there is only a week to go” almost everyone will know what you mean. Everyone is looking forward to a return to normality. And as that time gets closer people are more and more aware that they have been “holding on”. Now they are beginning to realise quite what they face. There are a great many issues that will catch up with us when we are completely free of restriction.

*For many people there is ground to be re-won. There are those who are desperate to go on holiday to France, maybe because they have property there. Earlier this week, on a walk with friends, we tried to go into a church and look around – but it was locked. It never used to be. The virus has changed all of that. So the question that confronts us now is this: are we going to recapture the lost ground, or does God have in mind to do something new? In many ways the God of creation, the God of the resurrection and the God of inspiration is always doing new things and now is no different.

*I say this because there will doubtless be a feeling among many people that we must DO something about this. Somehow we have to get people's attention back to God, to the Bible, back to the church. The secret growth of the kingdom appears not to have been happening while we have not been able to meet or speak face to face. There has not been an opportunity to plant the tiny seeds that will grow into great trees while the pandemic has been on the loose. We need to remember that it is down to God, not down to us, to solve the problems of the kingdom.

*The prophet Samuel was involved in doing a new thing for God. But he very nearly got it catastrophically wrong because he would have anointed the oldest and not the youngest brother. Like Samuel we need to listen and to be open to God's ways. Nothing is going to be obvious because his ways are different from ours – and therein lies our hope.

When it came to leading the local sacrifice Saul did not wait for the delayed Samuel but took over and got on with it. On the basis of that God deserted Saul and called David instead. Timing is all important in God's way of doing things and to get the timing wrong is a much bigger issue than we might think at first.

*In my forty plus years in this Diocese I have seen many occasions when people felt called to institute something for God. Many of you will remember these too. In more recent times I remember Walk Wessex when 1000 men marched across our Diocese sharing the Gospel. Or J John with his mission in the Cathedral. Going back a long way I remember Billy Graham who played a large part in many lives in my generation. These were all people who felt they were called to do something. They could not wait. And instant action always has a strong fascination for us.

*So I want to repeat what I learned in recent months. Rowan Williams, our last Archbishop of Canterbury, says that "Mission is discovering where God is active and joining in". I think that is hugely significant. It is not about us starting something, but about following God's lead. It may not appeal as strongly as getting on and starting things ourselves, it certainly won't appeal in the same way, but it gets the exercise right.

*As we get back to "normal" – should such a thing be possible, we need to remember that God will not be about "getting back to normal" but he will be about doing a new thing. That is why we need to remember that Mission is always about God and not about us. The danger is that we shall think we are forging ahead when, in fact, we are forging new chains by which we shall be held back. We need to 1: WAIT upon God. 2: SEE where he is at work, remembering he works in a hidden way and 3: JOIN in with what he is doing in his time. For your next PCC: WHERE is God at work in our community?