

A DIFFERENT KIND OF KING

1 Samuel 16: 1-13; 1 Samuel 17: 24-37

The first Christians who followed Jesus were devastated when Jesus was executed. But somehow, very soon after his death they were claiming that he was raised from the dead and more. They were claiming he was sharing universal reign with God. The apostle Paul, writing his letters from as early as a mere decade after Jesus' crucifixion begins his letters by sending greetings in the name of "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." In the last book of the New Testament – the book of Revelations, The eternal throne of God is shared with Jesus who is both Lamb and Shepherd.

So what were these early Christians claiming about Jesus exactly? They were claiming that no human being can be in the same category as Jesus. He is no less than God's embodied presence on earth. He is also called Messiah, Lord and Christ. Messiah is the Hebrew word for king, Lord and Christ are equivalent words for king in Greek – the universal language of the empire. The only other contender for universal kingship was the Roman emperor Caesar. Caesar had conquered large chunks of the world and planned to keep conquering. How could a crucified peasant compete? What kind of king was Jesus?

The 2nd most common term for Jesus after messiah-king or Christ is: Son of David. The many prophecies of our Hebrew bible state that the coming Messiah who would finally save Israel and through Israel the whole world would have to be one who was born in the lineage of king David. So what is it about king David that makes him an important link in understanding Jesus as king?

Well, David, like many heroes of the faith as the bible tells the stories, is a flawed character. But through the grace and mercy of God he shines in some remarkable ways. So what is it about David that shines a light on the kind of king Jesus is supposed to be? Israel as a whole is a small nation. And by the time Israel is writing down its stories, the world is being dominated by empire after empire. How does a small, easily negligible nation, easily swallowed up and erased in terms of culture, language and identity by larger global players, find a way to survive and thrive. What wisdom, insight and divine revelation are given those who must find ways to survive and thrive on the margins of empires? What alternative ways of thinking about power and using power are opened up for those who don't want to conquer the world but shape it toward peace?

The story of David, read through the lens of Jesus as Christ, opens up some fascinating avenues, especially the early stories when David was still on the margins and not corrupted by power itself.

Our first reading tells the story of the anointing of David as king. His anointing is highly unconventional. Samuel, the great prophet and High Priest of Israel, must act in secret. Why? Because the reigning King at the time, Saul, would be threatened by what Samuel is about to do. Saul has been rejected as king according to God as Samuel discerns the voice of God. Saul has misused his power as king and claimed it for himself without submitting to God as the one true king. Saul fits the profile of a king in every way externally. He is very king like in his physical stature, strength and class status within Israel. He takes on the role of a king easily and has no qualms using power forcefully to destroy his enemies. He also has no qualms using fear and threats as a way of gathering loyalty around him. He lives in a palace and dazzles the people with the glitz and glitter that comes with being a king and a having a royal family. Israel is glad to emulate the empire's ways, hoping it will rub off in their own success as a nation.

But Saul begins to develop a lust for power and wealth and all that goes with being king. He no longer listens to God as true king and thinks and behaves as if he is now God. Accountability and responsibility then begin to falter. Tyrannical threats become the norm now rather than cooperative consultation. Seeking to discern God's will is set aside and the desires of the king become all-consuming.

And so, Samuel hears the divine voice telling him two things: first, Saul's reign is coming to an end. Second, the next king has to be different. But different how? And now our reading:

1 Samuel 16. 1-13

The 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.

⁶ When 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.

David is anything but king like according to the conventional standards. He is young, small and highly inexperienced. He does not come out of a royal house. He is unknown and carries no status in Israel. He has no military experience or leadership experience. And yet, God, through Samuel, sees something in David's heart, something creative, something powerful, something that will build loyalty, trust and a desire to collaborate for a greater good with a humility and commitment before God.

Now we don't get all this from this opening story, but once we see David in action, we can look back and see what Samuel saw as potential. Israel has to be different and therefore needs a different kind of king. It will have to use power differently and think of power altogether differently. It will look at the world and understand that the world needs a different kind of power and a different kind of leadership for liberative change to happen beginning with those most marginalized, neglected and oppressed because they aren't linked up to power at the top.

So then, very soon after this clandestine anointing ceremony, we are taken to a scene on the battlefield. The Israelites are fighting their enemy the Philistines. The Philistines are no empire, but they have a clear superiority to the Israelites in terms of conventional resources for battle. The Philistines are technologically superior, having learned to mine iron and craft it into weaponry. The Israelites are far more limited. The Philistines are also more warlike, with a greater standing army trained to do nothing but fight. Most of Israel's soldiers are farmers when they're not soldiers. And so all this contrast is reflected in a now famous story: the battle between the Philistine giant named Goliath, and the young shepherd boy named David.

The reason David is even at the battle is practical. He has been sent there by his father to take food to his brothers at the battle front and some extra food too for the regiment's commanders. But once David arrives, what does he see. The fighting hasn't even begun. The Philistines have offered Israel a challenge. Rather than have a protracted battle, army against army, why not settle the fight one on one. The Philistines will pick one soldier and

the Israelites another soldier. Whoever wins, the battle is theirs too. Wow, seems like a peaceful solution. Except the Philistines have plans of conquest. Once the Israelites give up the battle and lose, the Philistines can conquer them completely without any losses. The Israelites will have lost without even putting up a fight. The Philistines will conquer with all their army intact. It's an all or nothing contest. Much more is at stake.

And the Philistines have another strategy, a guaranteed winning strategy – a super soldier: Goliath of Gath. We're told that Goliath is massive in size and a trained, experienced soldier from his youth, with a number of kills under his belt. He's got armour and weaponry and he's thirsting for a fight. He comes forward and starts taunting the Israelite soldiers, calling them cowards and worse names too. Every single Israelite soldier is quaking in fear. Even if any one of them is prepared to die fighting, standing up to a killer like Goliath means not only certain death, but the loss of the whole battle. That's what people will remember, not the courageous sacrifice but the loss of the whole war. The shame will be borne by the soldier's surviving family. Now, David is witnessing all this. He's just a shepherd boy. He's got no military training, no experience and no stature. And now our reading:

1 Samuel 17. 24-37

24 All the Israelites, when they saw the man, fled from him and were very much afraid. ²⁵The Israelites said, 'Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel. The king will greatly enrich the man who kills him, and will give him his daughter and make his family free in Israel.' ²⁶David said to the men who stood by him, 'What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?' ²⁷The people answered him in the same way, 'So shall it be done for the man who kills him.'

28 His eldest brother Eliab heard him talking to the men; and Eliab's anger was kindled against David. He said, 'Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle.' ²⁹David said, 'What have I done now? It was only a question.' ³⁰He turned away from him towards another and spoke in the same way; and the people answered him again as before.

31 When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul; and he sent for him. ³²David said to Saul, 'Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.' ³³Saul said to David, 'You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.' ³⁴But David said to Saul, 'Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, ³⁵I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. ³⁶Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living

God.' ³⁷David said, 'The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.' So Saul said to David, 'Go, and may the LORD be with you!'

David may have loads of courage and spunk, but his mission is a suicide mission. So what happens? First, King Saul gives David some armour to put on. Not only is it cumbersome to David, but it's too big for him. If David is going to defeat this monstrous giant, he has to use another method than force on force. What creative gifts does he have? What talent or ability can he use? Is there another kind of power than can defeat raw, forceful power? There is. David knows how to fight giants. You keep your distance, beyond the reach of spear and sword. David has a sling shot. He goes and gathers some smooth stones. He knows how to aim at a distance. Even though Goliath is covered with armour, there is a key vulnerable spot exposed – just above his eyes. David aims and fires and the stone barrels right at its mark. Goliath collapses. The battle is over. The Israelites and the Philistines see this as a divine sign. For such an outcome so highly unlikely, there must be another power at work. The Philistines flee in terror and the Israelites rejoice in this astonishing victory.

So what's the lesson here? At a deeply spiritual level we're being opened up here to something much greater than a mere historical battle. In order to slay this massive giant, this source of terror and fear that paralyzes and diminishes a people, there has to be a way to fight and win that uses a different tactic. Power against power as force will never win. But what about a different kind of power?

A Christian reading that sees glimpses of Christ everywhere recognizes in the story of David and Goliath a parable about a different kind of power. The only power that can stand against power as force is power as love. Love may be crushed by power again and again, but it rises up even greater every time it is crushed and crucified. Love-power opens doors not to war, domination and oppression, but to peace because it refuses to give up on the possibilities of bridge-building, cooperation, forgiveness, reconciliation and even friendship with those who would be deemed enemies. That's the kind of power Jesus represents and that's the kind of kingdom Jesus works to bring about among all those who recognize him as king.

Jesus' kingdom is a subversive, counter-cultural network of relationships and connections that refuses to submit to the demons of hate and retaliation, manipulation, competition, coercion, shaming, blaming and all those ways we use as human beings to put others down and cause them to submit or give way to us and our way. Jesus' kingdom works through the power of love to build very different ways of connecting and empowering others, building bridges rather than walls and offering an open hand rather than a closed fist.

Jesus' reign is spiritual. It becomes embodied every time he lives and works through us. We are, as the bible teaches, the hands, feet and heart of Christ as we live out of his Spirit in our

thinking, believing working and engaging in the world as lovers and peace-builders, as we find ways not to be intimidated by power as force, as we find our spiritual courage and creativity to develop alternative ways to engage and to rise up again and again when we fall down. May we find those opportunities in our personal lives, with family, friends and especially opponents, in our communities, with others in our societies and as citizens of this planet. Amen.