

1 Samuel 15. 34 – 16. 13

2 Corinthians 5. 14-17

Mark 4. 26-34

I lifted the photo of David on the front of the order of service today from the website entitled: *Meeting God in the Margin*. The blogger calls herself Mrs Nix. Is that a name? I wonder if that's really her name, given the tendency for people who put themselves out there on social media to be trolled and being pilloried. Maybe it's a nom-de-plume. She describes herself in this way on her web page: *I'm a middle-aged lady from Arkansas who married a Marine, travelled the world, got a degree in history, rescued some dogs, made a bunch of friends, and fell in love with the Bible. I also like to write things.*

She begins the piece on King David where this photograph appears: *King David. Sigh. What can I say? The guy gives me heartburn.* And she goes on to say how as children we are exposed to David, the runt of the litter, who's ruddy and handsome, the little guy who beats the willy-waving Goliath; the one who makes Israel great, and then writes all those psalms. But he's a rapist and murderer and not hesitant about manipulating affairs to suit his ends too. If we are honest with ourselves as we grow older and begin to hear about the ruddy lad's shenanigans with Bathsheba, the broken relationships with his children, and general family dysfunction – they would certainly be referred to Social Services - it becomes difficult to know what to do with this morally ambiguous character. Especially when he is held up by Matthew, the gospel writer. Matthew is very clear that Jesus' descent from King David is all-important. He begins the first chapter of his gospel with the words: *An account of the genealogy* of Jesus the Messiah,* the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

This is the third week since we began to gallop through the first book of Samuel. Firstly, we heard the calling of the boy Samuel by God; last week the old Samuel being asked by the people for a king, like their neighbours, and the making of Saul as king at Gilgal. Between last week's reading and this week's, Saul has fallen out of favour with God we are told – God, who was entirely opposed to the king idea in the first place anyway, but ultimately sort of relents and blesses Saul – and then there is a shift in favour from Saul to the ruddy and handsome, runt of the litter, David.

As I read through this series of accounts of these events over the first fifteen chapters of this first book of Samuel – Eli and his wretched sons, Samuel, Saul, David and God, apparently an active conversation partner with Samuel and inclined to anger, given to the granting of favour and the withdrawal of it, I have grown increasingly bewildered or bemused about the apparent fickleness of this deity. The text tells us that God changed God's mind about Saul. Why, I wonder? The only other time the Hebrew scriptures tell us that God changed God's mind, was when there was some reassessment on the part of God about the impact of the flood in the time of Noah. *I will never again curse the ground because of humankind,*

Jews, I understand, are able to laugh at scripture, when it all seems a bit silly. Christians, on the other hand, get deadly serious about scripture and its implications – both metaphorically and literally. We have shown a great propensity through history to kill, both body and soul, if we

thought our interpretation of it called for a bit of divinely ordained death. We are raised to not ask difficult questions, as though, if we do, the thing might break and fall apart.

So, like Mrs Nix, with my ambivalence about David, I was amused to see that the Pope called an audience with 100 comedians from around the globe on Friday of this week. From the pictures they mostly seemed to be men; but that's another thing. Shortly after Francis flew off to a meeting with the leaders of the G7 to talk with them about the challenges of AI. I think you'd need all the help you could get before going to such a meeting and hoping to retain your sanity. Anyway, Francis, told the gathered comedians that it was OK to laugh at God – it's not blasphemy, he said. And he encouraged the comedians to keep up the good work.

“In the midst of so much gloomy news, immersed as we are in so many social and even personal emergencies, you have the power to spread peace and smiles,” he said in a speech issued to the press by the Holy See.

“You are among the few to have the ability to speak to very different people, from different generations and cultural backgrounds. You unite people, because laughter is contagious.”

Francis has a very infectious smile, and you can see he enjoys laughing with others; he exudes a natural humanity. A Jesuit I was taught by in the last few years had recently come back from a posting in Rome at the Jesuit headquarters there. As Francis is a Jesuit, he would come to the Jesuit church in Rome, known as Gesù, on July 31, St Ignatius Day. My teacher said that Francis seemed to let down his guard when together with fellow Jesuits and would make jokes about the buttoned-up members of the Curia and the goings-on in the Vatican.

As I read through these fifteen chapters which have brought us to the anointing of David, my serious protestant mind has become increasingly bewildered about what has been going on. What has God been up to; God's complete opposition to the notion of kingship and irritation with the people, then the choosing of Saul; then the abandonment of Saul and the choosing of David. I don't know what to make of it. We are told that God is omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, and that God never changes. That is certainly not the nature of God being revealed here. So, I felt the need to throw all those divine monikers away.

As I listened to *Beside the Well* this week Howard Wallace, the retired OT professor from Pilgrim Theological College, said really this text is what can be called polemic. Polemic is what can be described as contentious rhetoric, intended to support a specific position by maybe slightly questionable claims in order to undermine the opposing position.

So, thinking about this text as polemic, we can see that it has been shaped in such a way as to show that David is the one divinely ordained as king. It's a text to prove the Davidic family's legitimacy. A kind of history by the winners. Apparently, Winston Churchill said: *History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.*

So, maybe we need to read with a fair degree of scepticism, if not down right suspicion. We can't just take the text at face value, assuming that all scripture says true things about God all the time. One of my teachers helpfully pointed out that scripture contains both the understandings and the misunderstandings about God. And so, if we are going to engage the scriptures seriously, not literally, then we have to get in shape for what Sally Douglass calls, some theological wrestling. Ask what we might have been told are awkward questions; and to be sure not to leave our wits at the door when we do so.

So we might ask the question is there anything we can glean about the nature of God from this. Or is it that we can more reliably glean some things about the human tendency for us to portray ourselves as on God's side; able to speak for God; enforce things, because God has ordained me. We can see in our own time how obnoxious individuals and groups are when they believe this about themselves. The English got a gutful of this approach and chopped off the head of the first Charles for thinking he had divine right. It seems like a brutal act to behead the monarch; maybe it was ultimately a theological act.

The longer I am at this game the more I think that the question the serpent asks Eve in that garden, east of Eden, is the fundamental religious question: the serpent asks the woman if she is able to eat from all the trees in the garden. She responds, "*You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.*" The serpent responds to her '*You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, ^{*} knowing good and evil.*'

My sense is that what goes on in the garden is not the issue of rebelliousness against God, or the entering of sin into the world like some kind of cosmic rupture, but this myth is about the simple human tendency to grandiosity that we can speak for God; claim that God is on our side. That we are like God and know the difference between good and evil.

Which is what this polemic from the scholars from the court of David seem to be doing. God favoured our king.

Or maybe what is being done is through the inconsistencies in the story, the flip-flopping of God, first this way, then that, maybe the writers are showing up the ease with which the powerful try to portray that God is with them. Inviting us to notice that actually this doesn't seem very like God and maybe encourage us to use our wits and wrestle with the inconsistencies and ask ourselves the question: *is this true? Can we say these things are true about God?*

You know we can do this. Because surprisingly the Bible won't break if we do it. We won't be struck down with a thunderbolt if we ask a question, use our wits, be unsatisfied with a simplistic answer, and be unafraid to say *Oh, humbug.*

Which brings me back to Pope Francis' meeting with the comedians this week. Maybe Francis might start an annual Vatican Comedy Festival. I'm sure it would be a winner. I wonder if another response to wrestling with the text is simply to laugh at the image of God in this story.

Because, if it is true that the psalms came from the pen of King David then we might wonder about all the battles he was supposed to have won, yet his affirmation in our psalm today:

*Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God.*

If David was truly the author, then what do we make of this mocking of military strength and the account of him being a strong warrior?

*But you laugh at them, O Lord;
you hold all the nations in derision.*

*The wicked plot against the righteous,
and gnash their teeth at them;*

¹³ *but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he sees that their day is coming.*

I wonder if in some ways the saga of David's family is meant to encourage us to laugh at the attempts of the powerful to claim divine legitimacy. Mary does it:

*His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.*

⁵¹ *He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

I wonder about the role of people of faith in scoffing at the mighty. Rather than in engaging in earnest dialogue and negotiations, to instead prick their bubble of hubris. To simply point out with, preferably some artistic flair that, indeed, the emperor is actually in his underwear. On 4 Corners recently there was an episode about a Chinese cartoonist who lampoons Ji Zinping on a regular basis. This guy's life is constantly at risk because no one, but no one, can laugh at such a serious fellow. The Age cartoonist, Matt Golding, the son of a Uniting Church minister, seems to manage to prick the bubble of political hubris - is our constant media diet.

The affirmation of the gospel is that in Jesus we have seen what the writer to the Ephesians says, is the exact imprint of God's very being. The Uniting Church in its Basis of Union makes this affirmation: Jesus himself, in his life and death, made the response of humility, obedience and trust which God had long sought in vain. In raising him to live and reign, God confirmed and completed the witness which Jesus bore to God on earth, reasserted claim over the whole of creation, pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love.

The church's affirmation is that Jesus understood the nature of God and embodied it in all the fullness that is possible in a human life. He is our understanding and all we seek to say about God needs to be seen in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus. Said and lived with humility. And as Jesus dies alone, he dies as sign that he is the only one to fully understand. Meaning all we claim to know or believe is provisional, which we must hold lightly, with humility, and with good humour to our faith and seek to embody this way Jesus calls us to.

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