

Bennochy church: 19th August 2018

History has a way of rewriting itself. We are told, it is often written from the perspective of the victors. Power more important than fact. Some people become more respected in death, than they ever were if in life. As people look back, history becomes retrospective. And we hear a lot today about 'fake news', so as history unfolds, the big question is, what is truth? What's actually happened and what is happening?

The history of the bible, particularity in the Old Testament, is not history as we understand it. It was written for a specific purpose. Particular moments in the life of the people God, are in a sense 'captured' by the ancient writers, to say something about God, and the ongoing struggles of the people of Israel, and their relationship with God. History in the eyes of the ancient writers was often determined by whether the people obeyed God, or not. Obedience lead to God blessing his people, and disobedience was often identified as the reason for military defeat. We would not understand history in such a way.

Victorious kings are often given a 'good press' in history. King Robert the Bruce, always synonymous with the Scottish victory, at the battle of Bannockburn, in 1314. The hero and warrior king. Just one day of his life, but it stands above everything else.

If you wanted to identify the two greatest kings of Israel, look no further than king David and his son Solomon. David, seen as

the ideal king and even an ancestor of the future Messiah, and Solomon, famed for his wisdom. Their reigns, probably the high point in the history of the nation of Israel, about 3000 years ago.

There is much about their lives we do not know, but certain incidents, have become part of the myth, come history, of the people of God. David slays the Philistine giant Goliath. I am sure that was one of the flannel graph stories from Sunday School. Who remembers flannel graph? David lusts after the beautiful Bathsheba. Solomon's mother. Not his finest hour, but interestingly kept in the narrative, and part of our story today, the famed wisdom of Solomon.

David had had a 'father-son' chat with Solomon just prior to his death. He says, obey God and you will prosper. That was the theology, the philosophy of the time. That is how they understood and believed, how God worked. The other bit is more interesting. David acknowledges to his son, that the promise God made to him, of his descendants ruling Israel, will only be kept, if Solomon obeys God. David has a vested interest here.

We come now to the beginning of the story of Solomon. Prior to David's' death, he is made king of Israel. But the beginning of his story sends out mixed messages. He first of all makes an alliance with the King of Egypt by marrying his daughter. That could have simply been a political decision to protect his southern boundary. His reign also begins in a blood bath, by getting rid

of all likely sources of opposition, including his elder brother - sound familiar! There are also unresolved tensions in the passage about where sacrifices were made and to whom, before the great temple of Jerusalem was build under Solomon's reign. But we are then told he loved the Lord, and followed the instructions of his father David, and settles down to a reign of peace and prosperity.

That is the background to our story. At Gibeon God asks Solomon, *"What would you like me to give you?"* In his dream, understood as a normal mode of communication by God. Places of sacrifice were often associated with dreams and visions - think of Jacobs ladder at Bethel and God's call to Samuel at Shiloh. Here Solomon replies, after giving due reference of course to his father David; as a young man, he seeks justice and to know the difference between good and evil. Good answer!

As the supreme judge and final arbiter, the kings was expected to vindicate the just and to protect the weak. How else, he says, will I be able to rule this great people of yours. And God was pleased. The temptation is always to grab more of what you already have and he as king had both power, and wealth. How many leaders in history have given in to such temptation? To grasp power, wealth and celebrity status for themselves, and ignore the needs of their people.

Solomon sets out to be a different kind of leader. Only time would tell, if wisdom and justice would be the principles by

which he would ultimately reign. It did begin well, with the famous story when he made a judgement between two women who claimed the same child.

And because he did not ask for the trappings of kingship, we are told, he would be blessed by God and given even more. There is something in this story that echoes words that would resonates generations later. The ancient kingdom and its power has long gone. Israel has lost its kings. They are an invaded people, part of the mighty Roman empire, but a rabbi walks the land and says to its people, what is it that God wants? *To seek first the Kingdom of God.*

That is countercultural. In God's kingdom, the greatest will be the least and the least the greatest. Instead of being kings and given places of highest honour, Jesus says to us, we are to learn the trust of a child, and the humility, of taking our seats in the lowest place. It is not easy to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

For Solomon, as king, his answer is that which was expected of him, and I would like to think that if he had met Jesus, he would have responded positively to such a call; *to those whom much has been given, much will be required.*

We are all asked to be good stewards of what God has given us. From our wealth and from our poverty, let us seek what is asked of us. In the way we live, the justice of God, the compassion of Christ and in all things, the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Amen.