

Morningside

Sermon

10.30am

19/3/23

## This is the one

*1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14*

For those who note such things, this is the Fourth Sunday in Lent. In Roman Catholic and High Anglican Christian traditions it's known as *Laetare Sunday*, from the Latin meaning to rejoice. Traditionally weddings, otherwise banned during Lent, could be performed on this day, and servants were released from service for the day to visit their mother church, the place in which they received the sacrament of Baptism (hence Mothering Sunday). It was seen as a day when the rigours and restrictions of Lent were relaxed. Refreshment Sunday is another name given to this day.

Some Roman Catholic and Anglican priests will wear pink or rose-coloured vestments to represent the joyful reward that comes from offering sacrifice with patience. I, of course, am wearing my usual festal black. So handy for baptisms, weddings and funerals, and slimming to the fuller figure. However I did manage to find a pair of socks with a bit of pink in them to brighten up my cheery black.

There is something almost cheerful and playful about God in our reading from the Old Testament this morning, admittedly set against the backdrop of a grim political reality. Sometime previously the children of Israel, settling into their Promised Land, had looked around at neighbouring countries and had noticed that those countries had kings, earthly leaders. Israel, the chosen people of God, had God. But God was invisible. God loved and provided and protected, but the children of Israel, looking across their borders, thought that somehow, they were lacking. They didn't have earthly, visible rulers like everyone else. God was not enough.

Through the prophet Samuel they petitioned God for a king. God was not happy. "Are you sure, are you really, really sure?" God asked. "You'll be forced into wars; you'll have to pay taxes. There will be reasonable and unreasonable demands made on you and your family." But the people persisted, and the king they got was Saul. He looked like a king; he sounded like a king; and soon enough he behaved like an ancient king; and it was not good for the children of Israel.

Saul went from bad to worse, and God's representative the prophet Samuel became more and more upset about what was happening to God's chosen people. Saul exercised not only harsh political power, but also interfered with how religion was practised, and Samuel could see that he had made a mistake in the choice he had made. Samuel, who had been a kind of father figure to Saul, had the difficult task of telling the king that because of Saul's actions, God had rejected him as king. Samuel never saw Saul again.

God moved onward, and this time guided Samuel to Bethlehem, a small village outside Jerusalem. There the family of Jesse lived. It was a dangerous and subversive act. Saul was still king, but another king needed to be chosen. Samuel knew that one of Jesse's sons was who God had in mind. So, like some kind of beauty pageant, the young men parade by. Would it be the tall one, or the handsome one, or the well-built one? But it was none of these. And everyone waited until the eighth son, outside the magical number seven, is located and brought to Bethlehem.

For leadership, God looks in a different way. God said with decisiveness, 'This is the one', yes, the youngest son, the shepherd boy, the one not deemed worthy enough to invite to the feast, the one out in the fields. 'This is the one'.

There's a little playful irony on God's part. David does have a good complexion, and beautiful eyes, and is handsome. But that is not what God sees. God scans the heart; God sees the soul.

David is one of the marginal people. He is uncredentialed. He has no social claim to make. Yet God's perception is beyond skin deep. Amongst the marginalised there are beautiful people. Among the little ones there is the potential for greatness. In the hearing of the story are the seed of hope for all those who hear its message. God's reality is shaped differently to ours. God sees further. God perceives more keenly.<sup>i</sup>

The older, stronger, better sons are passed over. The proud, the vain, the predictable winners are humiliated, while the one child everyone has discounted, or even forgotten, is selected by God. Hurrah for the little guy! Hurrah for the ostracised, the dismissed, the forgotten, the missing.<sup>ii</sup>

In recent months we have seen the Conservative Party choose not one, but two leaders, who have become Prime Minister. The Scottish National Party are currently selecting a leader who will become the next First Minister. Without going into the rights and wrongs of the politics, difficult, I know, but what was or might be the criterion people use to select a leader? Did or will people look to the exterior, and by that, I mean not just appearances but the spoken promises, or will they look to the heart, and make a judgement based on the character and potential of the individual?

When it comes to whichever wider elections come next, when you come to make your choice, will you vote for the same party you have always voted for, or will you attempt to read the heart, and the motivation, of those who are seeking to represent you at Westminster or Holyrood?

Or if you are in some club or group and you are looking to find someone who will lead the way ahead, what are the criterion that you use to make your judgement? You might be able to tell something by how someone looks, but what might you discern if you attempt to scan the heart?

I wonder, from this passage, do we learn something quite profound about God's vision? What is it that God sees when God looks at someone? What might it be that God discerns when we might

not see very much, if anything at all? That's what this passage is about. It challenges us to review the way we look at others, assess others, judge others. Are we charitable, or critical? Are we tolerant or intolerant? Do we base our views and decisions on instinct and fact, or is there some prejudice that blots everything else out?

How do we decide when we have to decide, 'This is the one'?

There are many reasons why I love baptisms. Each time a little morsel of flesh and blood is brought to church, this new infant, this new life, still nought years old, makes me wonder what their future might hold. What will become of them? What will be the gifts and talents, passed on genetically, or learned, that will shape the little one's life? How will they relate to others? What might interest them at school, or into further education if that is their option? What kind of work might they choose? How will they relate to the people around them? Will they find love? Will they give love? On a day of baptism all of these questions matter, not as something to be feared, but as something to be hoped. And what, I wonder, does God see in the potential of the little one baptised this morning? Just as God saw potential in the shepherd boy David? Just as God saw, and still sees, in us.

For this Bible passage speaks to us directly. 'This is the one', God says, when God looks at you. Had you ever thought about that? What is it, do you think, that God has always seen in you, and still sees in you, that God needs in the world today?

Are you the best friend? Are you the loving partner? Are you the hard grafter? Are you the quiet encourager? Are you the bright brain? Are you the singer or musician; the carer or comforter; the speaker or teacher; the volunteer or worker?

Are you the person who notices and responds? Are you the person who listens and understands?

Are you the person who gathers things together and implements? Are you the person who thinks

outside the box? Are you the person who perseveres when others give up? Are you the person who perceives the potential where others had casually dismissed? Are you the person asking honest questions in hard times? Are you the person, in the midst of difficult days, who can still, on this *Laetare Sunday*, not simply deck yourself in rosy colours, but find cause to rejoice and be glad at the good that is still to be found and enjoyed in the world in which you live?

'This is the one', said God, as David passed in front of his family, and the elders of Bethlehem, and the prophet Samuel.

'You are the one', says God, looking directly at you. Not just at your face, but into your heart, and recognising the potential that you will be able to offer wherever you find life takes you.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, pps123-124

<sup>ii</sup> James McTyre, *Feasting on the Word Year A*, Vol 2 p101