

## TURNING THE PAGE

1 Samuel 16:1-13

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Do you remember the television pictures of the night of the United States elections? Did you see the crowds in Chicago's Grant Park, cheering and even crying with joy? Or more recently, in January, did you see the pictures of President Obama's inauguration in Washington, with the crowds so vast that there seemed to be no end, and again all ecstatically joyful at that historic change of leadership? There was very much a feeling that a page of history had turned and a new chapter was about to be written.

Of course, what you didn't see, on either occasion were those who had been supporters of President Bush or of his republican party. They weren't partying in the streets, and if they wept it wasn't for joy. Whenever there is a change of leader in any nation or institution, there are those who rejoice and those who mourn. It's true in the church too, and as I prepare to go and minister in Laggan and Newtonmore, it would be foolish to pretend that it doesn't have a relevance for this church, here.

God, however, never leaves his people leader-less. In the weeks of Lent, leading up to Easter, we are going to look at how God prepared a new leader whom he had chosen for his people. We are going to look at parts of the story of David.

The tale begins, of course, before David. None of us come from nowhere and none of us are launched onto the world as onto a blank sheet of paper. There is always story before us from which we come and of which we become a part. We just have our own page or two in any part of the story. David grows up in the world of Israel's first King, Saul.

Saul had been chosen by God, chosen to be a King and presumably, since that is how Royalty works, chosen to found a royal dynasty. When he was chosen, first by Samuel then selected by lot before the people, he seemed a good choice. He was tall and strong, but also modest and overwhelmed. He didn't put himself forward. It is easier to have faith in someone whom others have chosen than someone who recommends himself. In some ways we can see what Saul was like by what we see of his eldest son, Jonathan, who is modest and self-effacing, content to let others have the limelight, but brave and honest. However having power went to Saul's head. It happens all too often. We saw something similar in Tony Blair, who promised to be Prime Minister for only a fixed term, but then went back on his word - twice. Once a leader is in the driving seat it is hard for him or her to know when the time has come to hand over. It is hard to see when the page has turned.

In the same way it became hard for Saul to know when there were things that he should not do. He was King under God, but in time he began to take the ritual religious duties which were not for him on his own shoulders. That idea of being under God began to annoy him. He began to bypass God's ways and say "It's alright. I say you can do this and I'm the King." With this mantra he became vengeful and gratuitously violent. In this country no one is above the law, and in God's world no one is above God and his laws.

God resolved not to found the Saulite dynasty of Kingship after all. He wanted a better example than that. So, while Saul is still alive and reigning, he sends Samuel to anoint the new King. Samuel is not overjoyed at this. He is one of those who mourn after Saul. Samuel has invested a lot in this King, for whom he was the King-maker; but, because he is also clear-sighted, he has seen Saul slip from what God's King should be, and that grieves him. But as for seeking another king - this is

not something that has occurred to him.

When we have invested heavily in a leader - a national leader, a church leader, a community leader, or even a leader in the family, it is hard for us to acknowledge that there is a need for real radical change, change that involves someone else becoming leader. Back in the days of the second world war, most people agreed that once war became a reality, Winston Churchill was a good leader to have. But in peace time it was different. He was rejected by an electorate tired of the war and its leaders, and then, when later he did again win office it turned out that he was no longer the best man for the job. The time for change had come, but there were enough people who hankered after the old ways, who mourned over their lost leader, that they tried to reinstate him. But it couldn't be done. That part of the story had moved on.

So God tells Samuel that he is turning over a page in the story and moving on. And now David enters the story: his first appearance. It's a familiar part of his story, how Samuel goes to the sacrifice, and the brothers pass before him and he rejects all the obvious candidates, the older, stronger brothers, experienced already in the arts of war. It's familiar too what God whispers in Samuel's ear: that we humans look on the outside - we do, we can't help it. Think how politicians these days employ image consultants and so on. We may look on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart. And in the heart God is not looking for the characteristics that recommend themselves to us. He is looking primarily for people who will humbly listen to him, who know their lowliness and want only to do his will.

Of course, this was what Saul had when he was first chosen, and with God having made us as free people, not puppets, so there is no guarantee that a person will retain that humble God-ward heart when they are given power. In fact just as David isn't an obvious choice, nor was Saul. And nor are many people whom God chooses to join his family and undertake service in his name. God's choice of David looked like foolishness, but then, God's way of doing things often looks that way.

After all, God sent his Son, not to be a victorious war-lord, but to be the Prince of Peace, the Suffering Servant, the sacrificial lamb. He sent him, as we remember at Christmas, not to a king's palace, but to a humble working family. He gave him a ministry which was much misunderstood, so that in the end he was put to death and seemed to have failed altogether. That is what seemed wise to God. No wonder St. Paul calls it foolishness in the eyes of the world.

God's way is the way of humility and service, of listening and pointing to him, not to ourselves, and it is no wonder that Paul could say to the Corinthians that not many of them came from the naturally powerful classes, the nobility or the intelligentsia. The message of the gospel is not naturally attractive to those who already have power or recognition in the world, for it teaches that this is of no importance. It is attractive to the ordinary people, the poor, those who think that they will never amount to much. For to them being called God's child is of far greater worth than any worldly reward. And so God chooses those who are prepared to serve him, who know they need his redeeming love, who will humbly do and be what he asks of them. And of them he make leaders in his way of self-giving love, the way of the Kingdom of God.

But it doesn't happen overnight. Today we read the story of David being anointed as king, but it isn't the story of his coronation. That will happen later. He has a lot to learn first, and God is going to teach him. He isn't to be sent to school or college, he isn't going to be asked to read huge theological tomes. God is going to teach him by experience just what it will mean to be a servant King: a leader of people but a follower of God. In the weeks of Lent we will follow him in that training. One

thing that we will notice is that David's training for service to God took place as he served God, seeking to live in his way. It took place as he lived his normal life (which was to become very unusual, but that's another matter). Too often we think that the training we receive in other parts of life, the experience we gather, is of no relevance to our Christian service. Too often we compartmentalise our lives into our Christian lives and our ordinary lives, and when we do that we feel incompetent in our "Christians" lives because they have not been given the care and attention we give to the rest. But God is Lord of all our lives, and all our lives is service and training for more service for him.

For this is relevant to us all. Not all of us are called to lead a nation, naturally. There needs to be the leaders and the led. Not all of us are called to be up-front leaders in the church, those we call the clergy. But when God calls us into his family he calls each of us to have a ministry. None of us are called just to enjoy our status in God's family. As we saw last Sunday evening, God shows his *mercy* to us by giving us ministry, giving us things that we can do for others in his name, which will promote his kingdom. He doesn't give us ministry as a punishment or as a way of proving our love for him. It is a sign of his mercy - he deems us worthy to be his children and even entrusts to us the family firm.

If we are Christians we are not sheep in need of a shepherd. As far as that goes, we have our shepherd, the good shepherd, who is Christ. When I began to be aware that God was asking that I turn a page in my life and so in the story of this church, there were many places I could have gone. It took a lot of prayer. The reason that I entered into discussions with the churches at Laggan and Newtonmore was because they didn't refer to themselves as a flock (which I always think implies helplessness), but said that they were a team needing a team leader. That is how God calls us: to be a team, each with his or her task to do - not just to service who and what we are already, but to reach out to others with the good news of the Kingdom of God. There are tasks of helping, of befriending, or welcome. There are tasks of teaching, of listening, of deciding. And above all there is the task of prayer to which all are called.

So pray for your leaders: pray for me, pray for the elders, pray for the person who God already knows will be the next minister. Pray, and use all that you are to work; and God will lead and train you for all that is to come.