

# I Samuel



Bible Notes  
October - December 2010

50p

October 1<sup>st</sup>

I Samuel 1 vv 1&2

Some people found Hebrews hard going and some people thought it was very rewarding. This quarter I thought we would do something entirely different, some simple stories from the Old Testament.

The story so far is that God had called Abraham to dwell in the Promised Land. His grandson Jacob had taken refuge from famine in Egypt. There the Israelites multiplied to the point where the Egyptians became afraid of them and enslaved them. God had set them free by Moses and, after forty years wandering in the Wilderness, had brought them across the Jordan and back into the Promised Land under Joshua. Once there, the Israelites conformed to their standard pattern of behaviour – standard for them and standard for the human race in general. Sometimes they were faithful to God and things went well. Often (especially when they were prosperous) they rebelled against God and things fell apart. Then, in their distress, they would return to God and things would go well until their next rebellion. In this period, there was very little central authority and the Israelites were ruled by judges, called as and when necessary. The last of these was Samuel.

October 2<sup>nd</sup>

I Samuel 1 vv 3-8

Although the story of Adam and Eve sets the pattern of one man, one wife, in the Old Testament, polygamy is not unusual and is not condemned. Some commentators have remarked, however, that polygamy never seems to have been conducive to domestic harmony. Hannah is barren, but her husband loves her most. Peninnah has children but is less favoured. The two women are jealous of one another. The family do worship faithfully at the shrine at Shiloh. (The Temple in Jerusalem will not be built until long after these events.) There does seem to be a discrepancy between being faithful worshippers of God and quarrelling with other members of the household. As Christians, we always have to ask ourselves whether we live up to what we say in worship.

October 3<sup>rd</sup> (Harvest Festival)

I Samuel 1 vv 9-11

As a man, and a single one at that, I find it hard to understand our society's attitude towards having children. On the one hand, we are told that women are not fulfilled in the traditional rôles of wives and mothers. They need the same education as men, an independent income and a career of their own. To this end, teenage girls are discouraged from becoming pregnant and women in their twenties and thirties use contraception and even abortion to delay the start of a family and to control its eventual size. On the other hand, we promote marriage with its implication that the two become one and cease to be two independent individuals, and many (though admittedly not all) women who do not have children feel somehow incomplete. So we have amazing fertility treatments for childless couples. We often observe, what seems to me very strange, the phenomenon of a couple, who have taken every precaution against having children during their most fertile years, expending huge amounts of money, time and emotional energy, in a desperate attempt to become parents when the biological clock has almost reached "too late." It also seems to me that a lot of people (especially women) who insist on their independence paradoxically also regret it if they cannot find a partner who is prepared to commit long term if not lifelong. As a mere man, I am greatly puzzled by all this.

I believe that we need a rational debate about all these things in the light of our scientific understanding - Biology, Sociology, Anthropology, etc, - and revealed religion – the Bible, the teaching of the Church, etc. – but I don't think we're likely to get one because of the emotions aroused.

Suffice to say here that I do not think (as some people seem to) that any prohibition on women ministers of religion is the only difference between men and women. I believe that it reflects the fact that God has made men and women different (though obviously equal) and that our society's failure to accept that men and women have different rôles is bound to lead to dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Men and women naturally cleave to one another in lifelong partnerships. The usual result of this union is the procreation of children and different family members have different responsibilities for the well-being of all the family. If we try to live as if this were not true, we are unfulfilled.

October 4<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 1 vv 12-18

As we shall see, things were fairly disorderly at Shiloh. The priests and the worshippers were pleasing themselves rather than worshipping God *in spirit and in truth*. This was obviously scandalous. In this context, Eli thought Hannah might be drunk, which would be disgusting in a holy place and during a time of worship. He recognised her sincerity, however, and promised that God would hear her prayer.

This story, however, leaves me with two questions. Ought Hannah to have bargained with God, promising that she would give her child to the LORD? And why did God grant Hannah a child when so many other infertile couples have prayed and prayed and still been disappointed?

My answer to the first question is that we should not bargain with God. Don't promise to do something good if God gives you what you want. Always try to do good things and trust God to give you what is good. My answer to the second question is related to my answer to the first. God knows what He is doing and we have to trust Him. In this case, it was not merely that Hannah wanted a child; this child would be a great prophet and judge and his life would benefit many people. God doesn't grant many miracles. It is much better to live in a universe which obeys the rules than to live in one in which the rules are changed arbitrarily. But, when He does perform a miracle, it is for a reason – a reason which might only be apparent to Him.

October 5<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 1 vv 19-28

I am sure I have told some you this story. Not so very long ago, there was a childless couple in Borstal. An African archdeacon was visiting and said to them what Eli said to Hannah and, the following year, the woman had a baby. Now there may be a "natural" explanation for this. And we also have to beware of charlatans who claim to be "faith healers". But the story is true and the couple's prayers were answered whether God used "natural" or "supernatural" means.

Samuel would probably have been about three when he was weaned and went to live with Eli. It still seems very young! Hannah did not, however, lose touch with her child.

October 6<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 2 vv 1-11

You can hardly help noticing how much Hannah's prayer is like Mary's Magnificat. Justice and mercy are of the nature of God. The Universe is governed by Justice and Mercy. Justice is as much a law of nature as gravity. It makes no more sense to behave unjustly or unmercifully than it does to jump out of an aeroplane without a parachute.

October 7<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 2 vv 12-17

Ouch! Religious professionals can be in a powerful position. Most people are religious, even if they practise false religions or mere superstition. This puts priests and ministers (even "humanist ministers") on a pedestal. Lord Acton was quite right that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. We see it in politicians and council officials. We see it in bosses and teachers. It is worst of all when it affects ministers of religion - for two reasons. One is that ministers of religion ought to have the spiritual resources to overcome the temptations of power. The other is that that the perversion of religion has such dire consequences. People are cheated of their opportunity for a genuine meeting with God. Twisted religion unleashes the forces of evil. In today's paper there is an account of the Taleban flogging a woman for adultery and then shooting her in the name of religion. I don't want anyone trying to tell me that no religion is better than any other or that they are entitled to their beliefs or that we have no right to judge! We have a responsibility to denounce and oppose such perversion.

October 8<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 2 vv 18-21

Elkanah's family remained close (emotionally if not physically) to what was going on at Shiloh. Samuel is a Nazarite – someone set apart for God like Sampson and, probably, John the Baptist, not shaving and abstaining from alcohol. (The Bible envisages people taking temporary Nazirite vows, presumably as part of their spiritual development, but all the Nazirites we know about are life long.) He ministers in the shrine. His mother makes him a coat every year. He seems to have had a very good relationship with the elderly

Eli, whose own sons have turned out to be such a disappointment to him. Elkanah and Hannah are blessed with further children. It all seems quite idyllic.

October 9<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 2 vv 22-26

Sex and religion. One abuse of power is obviously to exploit others for sexual favours. It is not unknown even today for members of congregations to fall for their pastors and for unscrupulous pastors to take advantage of them. Canaanite and other pagan religions included ritual prostitution as part of the cult. All religions are not the same or even equally good. People do horrible things in the name of religion and they use what they claim to be their faith in God to “justify” their ungodly practices.

The religious impulse is a powerful emotion present in most people. It needs to be guided by God, which means attending to His revelation of Himself in the Bible and, above all, in Jesus Christ. It is not our own ideas about God which should inform our conduct, but God’s revelation of Himself. We need discipline. As a good protestant, I find this discipline in my own experience of God and my meditation on Him and, supremely, in the Bible. I am also a good enough catholic (though not a Roman Catholic) to recognise the wise guidance and good discipline provided by the Church – the Spirit-filled community – and the wisdom she has accumulated through the ages. I am not ashamed to be called an Anglican and I think there is much to be said for doing things *decently and in order*, as St Paul says, even though there are people who think that we in the Church of England have sometimes so stressed order in worship that we have been in danger of quenching the Holy Spirit.

I’ll give you an example of what I mean. Worship always taken from authorised prayer books can be boring and repetitive. Newcomers may be put off. Those who come every week stop may thinking about what they are doing. So someone introduces a bright new way of doing things. Sometimes the new way becomes a personality cult. Sometimes it introduces heretical ideas or leaves out some of the uncomfortable truths of revelation. Sometimes the new way takes root and becomes, in time, the traditional way of doing things. The preface to the Prayer Book claims that, *It hath been the wisdom of the Church England, ever since the first compiling of her Publick Liturgy, to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and of too much easiness in admitting any variation from it.* That is the ideal, but I don’t think we’ve achieved it, or probably ever will!

October 10<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 2 vv 27-36

As Eli said in yesterday’s portion, it is obviously even worse to sin against God than to sin against other people. Our right conduct towards other people derives from our relationship with God. To sin against God is the basic error. Sinning against other people is the result of sinning against God.

It is also obvious that those who are especially privileged have an especial responsibility. The more you know of God, the more blessed you know yourself to be, the greater your responsibility to *walk worthy of your vocation*, to act like a Christian in your dealings with God and with other people.

So far, so obvious. What I find hard is what follows – the severity of the punishment which will be meted out on the house of Eli. As a modern man with a good liberal education, I am very uncomfortable with the notion of punishment. Surely a good God would be non-judgmental. A merciful God would let people off. So it’s a good thing I’ve got the Bible to put me straight. Justice requires the punishment of the wicked. Mercy is not an easy letting off. It is bought at the incredibly high price of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Maybe Eli’s family were ultimately pardoned. I’d certainly like to think so. But, if they were, it was because God cared enough to die for them, not because He was too easy-going to treat their crimes seriously.

October 11<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 3 v1

In those times, people couldn’t find God. Their worship had become corrupted by self-centredness. No doubt this reflected a general indifference to the Truth of religion. People were probably getting on with their farming and fishing, buying and selling, raising their families, going about their worldly business, and not thinking much about God except when they had problems. And then, when they wanted Him, they were too blinded spiritually to find Him.

October 12<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 3 vv 2-9

This must be one of the best known stories about Samuel. It frightens some children. They don't want anyone talking to them in the night, not even God. I'm sure God is still active in the world today. We might not hear His Voice like Samuel did, but I am sure He has a will for our lives. We ought to seek God's Will in our choice of career or if we are thinking of getting married or making any other big decision. We ought to be open to the possibility that He might be telling us to do a particular thing or visit a particular person or say a particular prayer or whatever. Indications that something is God's Will would be whether it is in accordance with the Bible and Christian teaching generally, the advice of Christian friends, how you honestly feel about it, whether events conspire to open doors or close doors. When I was thinking about ordination, I found that other doors closed and doors opened onto the road to becoming ordained – though it wasn't always an easy road.

October 13<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 3 vv 10-14

I always feel sorry for Eli at this point. How responsible is a parent when grown up sons or daughters go wrong? Is it the parents' fault. Were they too strict or too lax when the children were young? Were the children spoilt with too many good things? Or was there hardship in the house when they were growing up? How much influence can parents have when children are grown? I'm sure most parents do their best, but you can't always know what is best and you can't always do what you'd like to do if you had more time or money.

I suppose Hophni and Phineas were under Eli's authority as priests at Shiloh as well as because they were his sons. But is it easier or harder to discipline subordinates at work who also happen to be family members? Eli seems to have been a decent man, but a weak one. Maybe he should have got a grip on himself and acted tougher. I suppose that is what God's words to Samuel imply.

October 14<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 3 vv 15-18

One of the preacher's dilemmas is to know when to say things that might upset the congregation. As a pastor, you want to build people up, rather than break them down. As responsible for the work and indeed survival of the fellowship, you can't afford to alienate too many people. There might be a temptation to say upsetting things for all the wrong reasons. You might enjoy a bit of scolding of other people or of self-justification or moaning. As preacher you have to be aware of these things and take due care. However, the preacher's task is to preach the Word of God to people whether they like it or not and the evidence of the Bible is that true prophets (including Jesus) are very often opposed, rejected and persecuted. A receptive congregation will be like Eli. They'll want the truth how ever uncomfortable it might be.

October 15<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 3 vv 19-21

So Samuel embarked on his career as a prophet. In the Bible a prophet's career often seems to begin with an inaugural vision. The prophet is commissioned to be God's spokesman. Samuel speaks God's Word. The LORD works with Samuel. So the Word is heard and bears fruit in Shiloh and generally in the Land of Israel. God's Word is the same thing as God's Deeds. Heaven and earth are made by the Word of God. They work in accordance with God's Laws of physics, chemistry and biology. Morally and ethically, human beings, made in the image of God, human beings with the gift of language, are called to act in accordance with God's Laws. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh and in Him God effects the new creation, the redemption of the world. God's Word is never *mere words*. God's Word effects what it signifies. All Christian people are God's spokesmen and, from the Body of the Church, He calls specific people to be preachers and teachers. We pray for them.

October 16<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 4 v1

When we studied this passage in college, it so happened that one of the students had the surname Ebenezer. As she was Welsh, we wondered how she happened to have a Hebrew surname. The answer was that, when Welsh culture was being suppressed in the interests of unification with England, Welsh people were pressurised to drop their Welsh surnames. This explains why so many Welsh people have the same names – Jones, Williams, etc. – and why some adopted biblical names like Ebenezer. It raises the question of how much diversity should be tolerated within a unity?

October 17<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 4 vv 1-11

The Ark of the Covenant symbolised the presence of God. So the Israelites thought, that if they brought the Ark into their camp, God would be with them and they would defeat the Philistines. Sheer superstition. What God requires is not empty ritual, but sincerity of heart. They could not expect God to support them unless they acted like God's people, worshipping Him alone and obeying His Law of Love. Ironically, the only effect of bringing the Ark into the camp was that it made the Philistines fight harder.

October 18<sup>th</sup> (St Luke)

I Samuel 4 vv 12-22

This then is a really sad story. The Ark is taken. Hophni and Phineas die in accordance with the prophecy of judgment. Blind, old Eli collapses and dies. Phineas' wife dies in childbirth – naming the child Ichabod – *the glory is departed*. The disaster is apparently complete. The only answer will be for the people of Israel to return to the LORD to be healed.

Almighty God, who calledst Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist, and Physician of the soul; May it please thee, that, by the wholesome medicine of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 19<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 5 vv 1-5

I'm sure I can remember being taught this story in Junior School. The meaning is clear. Dagon is nothing. The Philistines thought that by placing the Ark in Dagon's Temple they were demonstrating Dagon's power over YHWH. In fact, the reverse was the case. The image of Dagon couldn't stand in the presence of God. Now I can't help wondering whether primary school children would still be taught this story in multicultural Britain. After all, there might be some Dagon worshippers in the community who could take offence. Anyway, who are we to say that one religion is better than another, that one idea of God is true and another false? I think the Taleban are sufficient proof that all religions aren't equally valid. So how do you decide what is true about God? The answer is that you need faith in Jesus Christ.

October 20<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 5 vv 6-12

The Philistines found that the Ark was too hot to handle. They took it as booty to prove their superiority. Now, as they passed it round from one town to another, they found it brought them nothing but trouble. The affliction was not only painful, but also embarrassing and humiliating.

Some Christians read this as history, but don't think God would afflict people like this nowadays. Other people read it as history and take it as a warning of what might happen if people mishandle holy things today. For others, the story is a "myth", not necessarily true history, but making the point that the LORD is God and must be treated always with respect. And, for others, who are neither Christians nor Jews, this is just a story made up (perhaps based on fact) so that the Israelites could feel superior and have a laugh at the Philistines' expense. I think you can legitimately read it any way but the last and still be a faithful Christian – though I think the second is preferable. The first might suggest that God is no longer active in this world. The third might suggest that He never has been!

October 21<sup>st</sup>

I Samuel 6 vv 1-6

Note that the Bible is willing to credit the priests and sages of pagan religions with some insight. They are not completely in the dark. If non-Christians were totally without insight, they would have no means of recognising God and therefore could not in any way be held responsible for their failure to do so. The fact of the matter is that human beings were made in the image of God. We do have consciences. The whole universe testifies of the nature of God. In Him we live and move and have our being. We ought to recognise God and it is only our sin which hides Him from us. So people can know something of God through His grace, sufficient to repent and put their faith in Him. Non-Christian religions and pagan philosophies do point towards God. They prepare the way for faith, for the reception of the Gospel. The Philistine priests and diviners know about religion and what you are supposed to do even though, sadly, they don't know the LORD. The fact that they make images of rodents as well as of haemorrhoids suggests to some people that this was bubonic plague.

October 22<sup>nd</sup>

I Samuel 6 vv 7-12

What causes things to happen? As human beings, we tend to take it for granted that effects have causes. Why does the apple fall? Because of gravity. Why did that child starve? Because there was no food. Why does this man no longer suffer from heart failure? He takes his medication. How come St Paul's cathedral has a dome? Christopher Wren designed it like that. We assume that everything is caused by something and that every cause is caused by something else. Religious people tend to the view that the ultimate cause is God. He is the uncaused Cause of everything. But then what about chance? Why did the penny come down tails? Why did that woman win the lottery? Why did this nucleus of Radium emit a proton and that one didn't? Is this pure chance or would you be able to explain or predict all these events if you had sufficient data? Can God predict lottery winners? Does He choose lottery winners? It is a puzzle whether things are caused or happen by chance, but one that it would appear the ancient Philistines had already considered and decided that there must be a difference.

October 23<sup>rd</sup>

I Samuel 6 vv 13-18

The cattle take the cart to Israelite territory even though this means leaving their calves behind. This is taken as proof that God is directing events and that things are not simply happening by chance. The people of Bethshemeth are delighted that the Ark is back on Israelite territory and they offer a sacrifice to God in thanksgiving, celebration and purification.

October 24<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 6 vv 19-21

When I was in the youth club at Wigmore, we were allowed to hang about in the church building I suppose after service. I remember the parent of one of us getting very upset because some of us were playing around the altar. More recently, when as a priest, I was responsible for a dual purpose building at Ramsgate, there was a nave altar which stayed in the nave even when the chancel was screened off and the nave was used as a hall. Sometimes this nave altar would get treated as an ordinary table and be laid out with goods for sale in the bazaar. Some people thought this didn't matter. Others were very upset by it. At our children's services at Halling, very often the young children run round the altar. Some people hate this; most don't mind. One thing I find that even I can't tolerate is men (even young boys) keeping their hats on in church. I'm not sure what I think about all this. In principle, I believe as a Christian, everything should be treated as holy. In that case there are no distinct holy places (church buildings), holy objects (altars, communion plate, etc.), holy people (priests, ministers, monks, nuns) or holy times (Sundays, Christmas, etc.). Nothing is "common" if everything is holy and there is no distinction between Sundays and weekdays, church buildings and public halls, the communion chalice and a wine glass, the vicar and a doctor or teacher. It seems, however, that most people who cease to distinguish between the holy and the "common" don't in practice treat everything as holy; they treat everything as "common." Sunday becomes a day for shopping and cleaning the car, Christmas for giving and getting and eating and drinking too much. God receives as little respect in the church as He does in the village hall. Holy Communion is treated as having no more significance than a bun fight. The ministerial priesthood is treated as a job rather than a vocation. Reluctantly, I'm coming to the conclusion that my heart should rule my head on this point. Only in heaven (even in New Testament times) is everything holy. Till then it is necessary to make a distinction between the holy and the "common", the special and the ordinary.

October 25<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 7 vv 1&2

When the Ark comes to Kirjath-jearim, it is treated with more respect. Eleazar is consecrated to look after it. The people of Kirjath-jearim prosper while they have the Ark with them. Am I romantic or old-fashioned because I still believe in the parish, the idea that at the heart of every community there should be a place designated for worship, a worshipping congregation and a priest or minister to take responsibility for the things of God? I fear we are moving towards the notion of a church building as a convenience for the congregation rather than a dwelling-place for God and a priest whose main *raison d'être* is to minister to the congregation rather than to God. If the focus is on the congregation as consumers of religion rather than on God, can we expect to be blessed?

October 26<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 7 vv 3&4

The Baalim and the Ashtaroth are the gods of Canaan. Baal means lord or husband and might have been confused in the minds of many Israelites with YHWH, Who is Lord and, in a sense, husband of His people. The Ashtaroth are female deities, perhaps consorts of Baal or even of YHWH in some people's imaginations.

The religious picture is confused. Some Israelites perhaps think of YHWH as a god of the Sinai desert who was all very well to bring them to the Promised Land, but that now they should worship the gods of Canaan. Others think of YHWH as a god of the hills and other gods as gods of the plains. They might think of YHWH as the god who gave victory to their armies, but Baal and Astarte as the gods who make the crops grow in Canaan. They might think Canaan is Baal's territory. They might want to worship the gods of the nations they now live among. They need to fit in. And they might think the sensuous worship of Baal is more fun than the more austere worship of YHWH. They might regard Baal as another name for YHWH or think that YHWH, Baal and Astarte are all aspects of the great God El. The task of prophets like Samuel is to sort out this mess. YHWH is one. He does not want human sacrifice or cult prostitution. He does demand justice and mercy. He is not one God among many, but He is God. He is not only the God of Israel. He is Lord of all the earth. He does hear our prayers. These are the kinds of things we have to believe about God if we hope to live blessed lives.

October 27<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 7 vv 5-14

It seems a bit of a dirty trick that the Philistines took advantage of the Israelites coming together for worship in order to attack them. But God's people can trust God. They have returned to God and they can rely on Him. Samuel has a reputation as an intercessor (See Psalm 99.) *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.* So keep praying. This is effectively the second Battle of Ebenezer. The name means *stone of help* and refers to the marker Samuel set on the battlefield. There is peace now from the Philistines in the west and the Amorites in the east. So there is peace for a people who have returned to God.

October 28<sup>th</sup> (St Simon & St Jude)

I Samuel 7 vv 15-17

At this time, there is no central capital city of Israel. Jerusalem still belongs to the Jebusites. There is no king. God is the King of Israel. Tribal elders and priests sort out disputes in the towns and villages. Judges like Samuel deal with harder matters and lead the people when there is a crisis such as a war. Israel is not like the surrounding nations, with upper classes which dominate and tyrannise their people. Israelites are free under God, a band of brothers, bound together by the Law of Love. This is a model for the people of God in every age.

O Almighty God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone; Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made an holy temple acceptable unto thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 29<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 8 vv 1-3

It wasn't usual at this period in Israel for political power to pass from father to son. It is always questionable how people should be chosen for high office. Given that power corrupts, there is always the probability that those who most want power are the very people who should not be trusted with it. The ancient Athenians selected their high officials by a lottery. That's no guarantee of competence. In many countries, people seize power by force. Sometimes they turn out to be good rulers, but more often they don't. The hereditary principle settles the succession without a fight, but there is no guarantee that the sons will be worthy of their father. We choose our leaders democratically, but there is no guarantee that we'll get good leaders. Probably Churchill was right. "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried." Anarchy would be disastrous. So we need to entrust people with power. But power corrupts. We want rulers who see themselves as servants, servants of God and servants of the people. And we need bloodless mechanisms for removing unsatisfactory rulers – elections.



October 30<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 8 vv 4-9

There are three reasons why the Israelites want a king at this time. They don't want to be ruled by Samuel's unworthy sons. That's quite understandable. They want a king because they are afraid of the Ammonites. This is less reasonable because they've managed to fight their enemies without a king before. And they want to be like the nations (nations = gentiles). That last is their big mistake. Israel is the people of God, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. They are called to be different, separate, apart, holy. They are a band of brothers free under God. They are not to be like the nations. They are to be a sign to the nations of what life should be and could be if only people would accept the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. In wanting to be like the nations they are denying their status as the people of God. There is an echo of this at the trial of Jesus 1,000 years later when they tell Pontius Pilate that they have no king but Caesar.

We Christians inherit that vocation to be the people of God, a royal priesthood, a band of brothers free under God. This means that we are transformed into the likeness of Christ and not conformed to the ways of this world.

October 31<sup>st</sup>

I Samuel 8 vv 10-22

When I told this story to our primary school children and told them about how the king would tax the Israelites and conscript the Israelites' children to fight his wars, till his fields and build his palaces, they said, "Just like our politicians, nowadays!" I thought this was rather cynical and told them that we should be thankful that our politicians are much less venal and corrupt than the rulers of many countries. But the children had a point. The expenses scandal was real enough. There is abuse of power in this country, not least in local government, though thankfully on nothing like the scale of what goes on in many parts of the world. You can be conscripted or have your property compulsorily purchased if the government says so. You can have your freedom and civil liberties taken away. It is not always the case even in this country that these decisions are taken democratically, fairly and impartially. As Thomas Jefferson said, "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance."

1<sup>st</sup> November (All Saints)

I Samuel 9 vv 1&2

We meet the new King today, though he has no idea yet that he will be King. He looks very promising – an attractive young man from a good family. He will start promisingly as King, but it will all go hopelessly wrong. His early promise will lead to nothing. He loses faith. He disobeys God. He becomes jealous. He becomes distrustful of the people who love him. Saints are not perfect people. They are people who have faith even when they doubt. They are people who try to do the right thing, but when they fail they repent and know that they are forgiven. They are people who remain open to the love of God and the love of other people.

O Almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord; Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

2<sup>nd</sup> November

I Samuel 9 vv 3-10

Saul's father's asses get lost. Saul and his servant look for them without success. The servant suggests consulting Samuel. After a bit of argument, Saul agrees. One apparently chance event to which Saul and the servant choose how to react. Yet God is arranging for Saul and Samuel to meet about an entirely different matter which Saul knows nothing about. So Providence works. We make decisions about our lives. Stuff happens, sometimes apparently by chance. Yet God is in charge, bringing about His purposes. It is much better if we are working with the grain of God's plans, but we can't ultimately thwart them. When we pray *Thy Kingdom come* and work for the coming of God's Kingdom we are doing right, but God's Kingdom will come whatever you and I do or fail to do. When it does, it will be good to have been one of its citizens from the first time we had the opportunity to join. Eleventh hour conversions are all very well but you miss the joy of working in the vineyard in the sure and certain hope of the reward the Master promised.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> November

I Samuel 9 vv 11-14

Shrines were often at high places like Cuxton Church. Maybe people felt closer to Heaven there. Samuel was the local minister in semi-retirement from national life and he would preside at the festival. Most sacrificed animals were eaten and, given that meat was eaten comparatively rarely (at least by the poor), these celebrations would be special and joyful occasions – acts of worship and communal conviviality. There is a lot to be said for including a social event in a religious festival – mulled wine after the Carol Service, a Supper following the Harvest Festival Hymns of Praise. If the Church is the Body of Christ, to be with one another is to be with the Lord. If we celebrate a holy day with a Communion service in which we all sit as far away from one another as possible, and each one makes his or her own Communion, before going home without speaking to anyone, we miss out on something important, but so we do if we cut out the service and get straight on with a supper or barn dance. I don't think the Church should absorb all of our social life. If we have no non-Christian friends, how can we do God's work in the world? But there is something wrong if we don't want to enjoy ourselves with other Christians.

### 4<sup>th</sup> November

I Samuel 9 vv 15-24

Samuel knows what God is doing in sending Saul to him. He dismisses the relatively unimportant issue of the missing asses. He makes much of Saul, though he doesn't exactly say why at this stage. Saul is appropriately modest and it is a shame that power will so corrupt him that this will cease to be the case. Maybe his modesty indicates a lack of self-confidence, which he later tries to hide by becoming a bully. Christians ought to be realistic about the gifts God has given them. We should not be falsely modest, nor boastful. We receive from God both our vocation in life and the gifts with which to carry it out. Where we feel we are lacking, we ought not to try to cover up our deficiencies, but to pray for the grace that we need to do the good works God has prepared for us to walk in.

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. (Romans 12 v3).

### 5<sup>th</sup> November

I Samuel 9 v 25 – 10 v 4

So eventually Samuel comes to the main business. Quietly on the roof he anoints the new King of Israel. Kings and priests were anointed. The word "anointed" is equivalent to "Christ" in Greek and "Messiah" in Hebrew. This is the background to our faith that Jesus is the Christ. In later times, the anointing was associated explicitly with the giving of the Holy Spirit. Oil is increasingly used to anoint people being baptised and confirmed. All Christians are anointed with the Holy Spirit and are called to be priests and kings with and in Christ.

### 6<sup>th</sup> November

I Samuel 10 vv 5-13

This prophesying is probably the same phenomenon as speaking in tongues in the New Testament. A person is filled with the Spirit of God in such a way that he offers praise, sings and speaks in an ecstasy which goes beyond his rational understanding. It is a phenomenon which has recurred throughout Christian history and it is not confined to Christians. It is narrow-minded to write it off as always illegitimate. It is even more wrong to claim that it is necessary for Christians to experience something like this. God transcends human reason, but He is not irrational. It is important to pray and praise with understanding and to share our faith – to preach and teach – in a manner which is intelligible to other people.

### 7<sup>th</sup> November

I Samuel 10 vv 14-16

Saul tells the truth, but not the whole truth. He misses out the most significant bit of the story of his visit to Samuel, but this matter of the kingdom is not yet ripe for publication. Truth is a tricky issue. To bear false witness is to break one of the commandments. And surely it is as bad to withhold information which could get an innocent man off as it is to tell a lie in order to convict him. Jesus Himself is the Way, the TRUTH, and the Life. The father of lies is the Devil. Yet it wouldn't be right to tell the Gestapo where the Jewish children were hiding. You might well feel justified in lying to help them escape – just as the Hebrew midwives told Pharaoh that the Hebrew women were so quick in childbirth that the midwives were too late to kill the boy babies at birth. I suppose we have to decide how much of the truth to disclose in the light of an honest assessment of what love demands.

November 8<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 10 vv 17-27

The underlying message of these chapters is that the Israelites were wrong to want a king. Israel was not like the nations, the gentiles. (The word “nations” is pretty well synonymous with “gentiles” in the Bible *goyim* גוים in Hebrew, *ethnoi* εθνοι in Greek.) God is the King of Israel. In choosing to live under a king, they will forfeit their freedom under God. Their religion will be at risk, their independence, their liberty.

Yet, when they insist on having a king, God chooses the right man for them, just as He makes clothes for Adam and Eve to wear when their sinful rebellion against Him gets them evicted from the Garden of Eden. God does not give up on us, despite our stupidity and sinfulness.

November 9<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 11 vv 1-15

Saul was anointed King privately by Samuel. Then he was designated King in front of the convocation at Mizpeh. But it is only now that he takes power in order to fight the Ammonites. Note the brutality of the Ammonites which perhaps helps us to understand what will follow. More positively, notice Saul's magnanimity towards those who opposed him, which matches his modesty in hiding *among the stuff* at Mizpeh.

November 10<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 12 vv 1-5

Samuel needs to get the people to accept that he has been a good ruler. It is interesting to notice how he defines what a good ruler is. He hasn't exploited the people for his own benefit. He hasn't been prepared to pervert the course of justice. He has been honest. He has not oppressed the people.

The temptations of power were the same then as they are now and we can all think of countries where the people live in poverty and pay taxes to support the upper classes in luxury. We can all think of places where bribery is common place. There are too many regions of the world where people with power are brutal or oppressive apparently just for fun. It is incredibly important to create and maintain a society in which power is used for the common good and not for the benefit merely of the powerful. Watch and pray for other countries and for our own.

November 11<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 12 vv 6-15

Again and again in the Bible you get this recapitulation of what God has done for His people. We know that we can trust God for the present and the future because we know His record. We know the Old Testament story. We know what Jesus accomplished. We may know something of what the Holy Spirit has done in the history of the Church. We know what God has done in our own lives and the lives of people we know. So we know that we can trust God.

These recapitulations of the deeds of God are, however, always accompanied by a recapitulation of the failures of God's people – their rebellion against God, their pursuit of false gods, their unjust and unmerciful treatment of other people. These potted histories remind us time and again that, when we don't walk with God, when we are not transformed into His likeness, things go wrong for us and it is only by returning to God that we can be redeemed from the mess our stupidity and sinfulness have got us into. There is then, as here, the assurance that things will be all right if only we will obey the voice of the LORD our God.

November 12<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 12 vv 16-25

This terrible unseasonable storm is a demonstration of God's wrath at their rejection of Him as their King. Samuel won't giving up praying for the people, though. Remember his rôle as an intercessor. Jesus intercedes for us at the Right Hand of God and never gives up, not matter what we have done. Things will be all right if they now follow God and not “emptiness” (v21). The word (Tohu, תהו) probably means idols here, but it encompasses everything that men worship which is less than God – power, money, position, sex, celebrity, etc. It is the same Hebrew word that is used in Genesis 1 when it says that before the creation, the earth was without form (תהו) and void. This vanity, emptiness or formlessness is the world without God. If you worship formlessness, emptiness, vanity, that is what you become.

November 13<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 13 vv 1-7

The Philistines occupied the Mediterranean coast of the land we now call Israel or Palestine. They attempted over a long period to extend their rule over the whole land, whereas, of course, the Israelites wanted to assert their independence. Saul's son Jonathan challenges the Philistines by attacking their garrison. The Philistines gather their armies and the Israelites run away, leaving Saul with a big problem!

November 13<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 13 vv 8-16

Saul does not feel able to go into battle without offering a sacrifice. Samuel is supposed to offer the sacrifice but he is delayed in coming to Gilgal. Meanwhile Saul's fearful soldiers are melting away. So Saul decides to offer the sacrifice himself, whereupon Samuel turns up and tells him that having done so will cost him the kingdom.

It wasn't uncommon in the ancient world for kings to be priests. We thought a good deal about Melchizedek in last quarter's notes in Hebrews. But to be king and priest puts a huge amount of power in one pair of hands and power corrupts. So Israel kept separate the two kinds of power – kingly and priestly, secular and sacred. Only in Jesus can they be reunited.

In Israel, however, the secular power was morally subject to the spiritual power. So it was in Mediaeval Europe. Briefly, in reformation England, Henry VIII appointed himself head of both church and state. In subsequent reigns there was an evolving relationship between the power of bishops and other spiritual leaders in the Church of England and parliament (Until C19 the House of Commons was exclusively made up of members of Church of England.) all under the king or queen. Nowadays we tend to stress the separation of Church and state, but tend to assume that the secular dominates, but how can that be so if the Church represents God to the world?

November 14<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 13 vv 17-23

These events are on the cusp of the Bronze and Iron Ages. The Philistines are dominant in Israel and are keeping the new technology of iron weapons to themselves. This is one thing they've got over Israel. But the biblical message is that it is more important to trust in God than to have the latest technology!

November 15<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 14 vv 1-18

It seems that there was stalemate. The Philistines did not attack the Israelites and the Israelites did not attack the Philistines. Something had to be done to break the stalemate and Jonathan, Saul's son, launched a brave attack on a Philistine garrison. The details are a bit obscure, but Jonathan was brave and trusted in God. *For there is no restraint to the LORD to save by many or by few.* The Philistines panicked and the attack turned into a rout, which the Israelites followed up, but not to the degree they could have done, as we shall see.

The message is clear enough as it is so often in the Bible. The battle goes not to the numerous or to the powerful, but to the people who are on the LORD's side and that is why we don't have to panic because our churches are small and weak or because we feel personally overwhelmed by the circumstances of our lives.

November 16<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 14 vv 19-23

When you see the finish of a Marathon, the winner usually comes in looking like he could easily run a lap of honour, but the person coming a few seconds behind him, having run the same distance in a slightly slower time, looks beat. When I've run Marathons, the encouragement of the huge crowd in big events like London really inspires you to keep going, in contrast to the negligible support you get in some provincial runs. Morale makes a tremendous difference to performance. When Jonathan overcame the Philistine garrison, thousands of Israelites who had been lying low because they thought they had no chance, came out of hiding and joined the victorious army. Nothing succeeds like success. Demoralised people give up. Now, in the Church, we are on the winning side. The battle is the LORD's. We have no reason ever to be demoralised.

November 17<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 14 vv 24-32

You've got to feel sorry for Saul. He did try to do the right thing, but he really didn't know what the right thing was. He thought that a national fast would please God and therefore contribute to victory. Of course,

it had the opposite effect. The people were too hungry to keep fighting. Religious people sometimes seriously misunderstand what the LORD requires with disastrous consequence. Humble waiting on God, prayer, listening to the Scriptures, contemplating the teaching of the Church are the remedies.

O God, forasmuch as without thee, we are not able to please thee; Mercifully grant, that thy Holy spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 18<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 14 vv 33-35

Life is sacred. In the Old Testament the blood of an animal signifies its sacred life and, when an animal is killed for food, this has to be poured out on the ground as an offering to God. This is why Saul makes the people bring the spoil to a makeshift altar to be properly killed before being eaten. This seems strange to us, but it is good to be mindful of the sacredness of life. If we kill animals for food or for any other reason, we must do so humanely. Similarly farm animals, pets and zoo animals must be treated with kindness. We ought not so to pollute the environment that we harm ourselves or other forms of life. [Incidentally I always think that there is something of an inconsistency between having laws to protect both wild and domestic animals from cruelty and neglect, but our society seems to be indifferent to the millions of animals killed and injured on our roads. I suppose this is considered a price worth paying for the convenience of rapid personal transport.]

November 19<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 14 vv 36&37

Saul wants now to finish off the Philistines. The somewhat disingenuous reply of his advisers indicates that they think there is something wrong with this idea. The priest says they should ask God what to do, but God apparently doesn't give them an answer. This business of the foolish vow to keep a national fast is coming back to haunt Saul. Going his own way and not listening to God, he has got himself into a situation where he is cut off from God. The remedy would be to repent, but, he can't see that and continues on his disastrous course of trying to sort out his own problems without reference to God or to wise counsellors.

November 20<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 14 vv 38-46

When the Channel Tunnel Bill was before parliament in the mid 1980s, both government and British Rail assured the general public and MPs that, if the Tunnel were built, there would be no need for any additional railway line to be built through Kent. There was a very strong feeling that, whatever was decided about a Channel Tunnel, Kent should remain the Garden of England. What happened next was that, when the Tunnel, was well under construction, BR and the government informed us that a new rail link would, after all, be necessary and the rest, as they say, is history. The rail link has brought much faster journey times to Europe and high speed domestic services to Kent, which have certainly improved my experience as a traveller. On the other hand, the rail link and the motorway development associated with the Tunnel have contributed to a major change in the character of our county. You may rejoice in the jobs and new homes. You may lament the loss of countryside and decline in the quality of our lives. You can do both. You don't have to be consistent! I always felt, however, that whether the rail link would be a good or bad thing was not so much the point as that we had been promised that it would not happen. I believe that promises are very important and ought not to be broken and, in that I am supported by the Bible. See Ps 15. I strongly suspected that the authorities had always intended to build a channel tunnel rail link and had dissembled with the public and our representatives in parliament in order to get the bill passed. But even if their promises were based on mistaken analyses of the statistics rather than on deliberate lies I still felt that they ought to be kept. Now Saul had made a stupid vow that there would be a national fast on the day they fought the Philistines and then another stupid vow that he would kill the man who had broken the fast – even if that man was his own son Jonathan, the one who had done more than any man to beat the Philistines. The people prevent him from carrying out this vow. It makes sense then to say that, if we have promised to do something which is wrong (like kill our wife's boyfriend) we ought not to do it. Likewise if we have promised to do something that turns out to be wrong (like to fight for our country to the last man when it becomes apparent that there is no hope of victory) we can break our promise. I do not think, however, that difficult examples like these can be taken as a licence to promise carelessly or to break our promises lightly.

November 21<sup>st</sup>

I Samuel 14 vv 47-52

In lots of ways, Saul's reign was a success. He defeated many of Israel's enemies and kept the Philistines at bay. He established a fairly prosperous kingdom. It was his flawed character that destroyed him.

November 22<sup>nd</sup>

I Samuel 15 vv 1-5

I find this very difficult – that God tells Saul to destroy the Amalekites. I know that many modern Christians (including many clergy) would simply say that the biblical writers had got it wrong here. They would say that God does not sponsor genocide and that the Old Testament authors have misunderstood God. But that's too easy. If we simply say that the Bible is wrong where it disagrees with us, we are claiming to be the arbiters of what is right and not the Bible. In that case we wouldn't need the Bible or, indeed, the tradition of the Church. We would just make up our own minds what we wanted to believe. And then, when our beliefs came into question, where would we turn for an authority outside ourselves? If I believe what I believe simply because it seems right to me, what answer can I give you if you tell me that you believe something different? If I want to say that the Nazis or the Taleban are wrong, by what authority do I condemn them? I am not saying that God does sponsor genocide. I am saying that we have to wrestle with these hard patches as Holy Scripture. If we pick and choose which bits of the Bible are the authentic Word of God, we may find that we are left with nothing, just as, if you pick at a woollen garment, you may finish up with a useless tangle of wool and no garment. In short I would say that God's written Word in the Bible has to be understood in the Light of Jesus, God's Word made flesh, but it requires great spiritual depth and humility to succeed in this task.

November 23<sup>rd</sup>

I Samuel 15 vv 6-9

I am not a fan of the European Union. One thing about modern Europe, however, we have to be very thankful for. Countries that fought one another in two world wars now live in peace. It is more usual in human history to remember past conflicts and to fight them over and over again. You have only to look at Northern Ireland to see commemorations of battles fought centuries ago used to justify continued segregation, distrust and violence. In Saul's reign they are slaughtering the Amalekites based on what happened centuries before, but sparing the Kenites for the same reason. I'm glad in the EU we are no longer fighting Germany, but I do wonder if we've been fair to our commonwealth allies who supported us in two world wars, but whose citizens are now less welcome as immigrants than our former enemies?

November 24<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 15 vv 10&11

To be honest, I would have expected God to commend Saul for sparing the Amalekites and not destroying their property. However, in the story we have, this sparing of the Amalekites is represented as an act of disobedience to God, one that leads to Saul's final rejection by God as king.

I can only think of two possible explanations and I may be completely wrong here. But, it seems to me, that, if the spoils of war had to be destroyed in a burnt offering, that would take away robbery as a motive for war. There would be no point in waging war simply to steal another tribe's goods if you had to destroy all the booty. The other is that war was so savage that you had to be ruthless to end it. I have a lot of sympathy with pacifism but feel bound to accept that there is such a thing as a just war. If, however, you once agree that it is sometimes right to fight a war you have to accept that you are going to kill and injure people and that you will be ordering men on your own side into situations where they are likely to be killed or injured. Agreements like the Geneva Conventions seek to civilise war, but the reality is that, in a war, there will be killing and maiming. Even the Geneva Conventions often get forgotten when the fighting is desperate. So, do you kill all the Amalekites once and for all or do you spare some of them to fight another day?

November 25<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 15 vv 12-23

Samuel loved Saul and he wrestled with God in prayer before accepting that God had rejected Saul. One of Saul's flaws was his inability to profit by the love of those around him. At his funeral they might well have played *My Way*, but he would have been wiser if his way had been to be more open to God and to his family and friends.

November 26<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 15 vv 24-31

Samuel probably was so angry with Saul because he was so disappointed in him. Saul still needed Samuel, though it was difficult for his pride to admit this. They scuffle and even their scuffle becomes a sign of Saul's eventual dissolution. But anarchy is a terrible thing. Order must be maintained and they put on a public show of unity.

November 27<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 15 vv 32-35

People react with horror to this scene of the elderly prophet taking his sword to the Amalekite King Agag. Understandably, but Agag was a war criminal. We hanged prominent Nazis after the Second World War. We hope that war crimes trials will deter future dictators. He feel that justice requires the perpetrators of terrible evil to suffer condign punishment. Why should they get away with it, when their victims didn't? And yet, as Christians, we believe that God loves even the vilest offender. We believe in mercy. We believe that to treat an evil man in the way he treated other people makes us no better than him. Even Agag was made in the image of God. Justice and mercy – apparently opposites, essentially one and the same thing, a paradox resolved only on the Cross, but don't take that for an easy answer.

November 28<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 16 vv 1-13

We're on much easier territory here. God sends Samuel to choose Saul's replacement. He will be one of the sons of Jesse. The LORD looks on the character rather than the outward appearance. So obvious. And yet is it obvious? If we judge people by their character rather than by what they look like, why do people spend so much time and money trying to look good? To a degree, our appearance does reflect our character. Are we the sort of person who thinks a nose job is worth the pain and money? Do we care enough about what our customers or employers think of us to dress up for them? Are we the sort of clergy who believe that wearing vestments enhances our performance as worship leaders or do we believe that they send entirely the wrong signals about who we think we are? Even so, it is character that counts. I wear vestments to celebrate the Eucharist, but I'd celebrate without if they weren't available. I'd rather have an employee who works hard than one who is well dressed. I'd rather be married to a woman who loved me than to one whose perfect body resembled a picture in a magazine. Yes character counts. Saul sinned and repentance wasn't in his nature. David sinned too, but he always returned to God in penitence and faith. David was Israel's greatest king.

November 29<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 16 vv 14-23

At his anointing, the Spirit of God comes on David. So far so good, but why does it say that an evil spirit from the LORD seized Saul? The biblical view is that nothing happens outside of the providence of God. If something bad happens, God must be in it. That takes some believing, but the alternative is worse – the idea that bad things can happen to you and God is not in control. We're at the limits of our understanding here, but we must say the following. We have the freedom to make moral choices and we are responsible for our actions. Events in nature happen according to the dispassionate laws of science and probably also by chance. Everything that happens, happens within the Providence of God. Therefore faith will not be disappointed.

November 30<sup>th</sup> (St Andrew)

I Samuel 17 1-27

When Jesus fed the 5,000, it was Andrew who identified the lad with the five loaves and two fishes. The LORD can save with few just as He can with many. A youth like David can defeat a warrior like Goliath if he trusts in God. *Faith moves mountains*. Andrew was several times instrumental in bringing other people to Jesus. He fostered and encouraged faith in others. David's brothers were discouraging to David. Andrew supported others in getting to know Jesus in Whom all things are possible.

Almighty God, who didst give such grace unto thy holy Apostle Saint Andrew, that he readily obeyed the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him without delay; Grant unto us all, that we being called by thy holy Word, may forthwith give up ourselves obediently to fulfil thy holy commandments; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 1<sup>st</sup>

I Samuel 17 vv 28-54

David is a brave lad. He puts his trust in God, but it isn't a miracle that he defeats Goliath. It is common sense that an active lightly clad boy with a sling could overcome a lumbering giant in heavy armour armed with a sword and a spear. Common sense is a big part of religion and a lot of error could be avoided if only religious people paused and considered the need to be sensible as well as faithful. Faith and reason never conflict since God is the source and goal of both.

### December 2<sup>nd</sup>

I Samuel 17 v 55 – 18 v 4

Not surprisingly, David is the hero of the hour. Everyone falls for him, the king, the king's son and the king's servants. David is good looking and a fine musician. Now he has proved himself a brave and resourceful warrior and saved his people from humiliation. I like the bit where Jonathan gives David his clothes, just as footballers today swap shirts at the end of a match. If people were sensible, this talented individual could be a great asset around the palace.

### December 3<sup>rd</sup>

I Samuel 18 vv 5-9

Unfortunately Saul isn't sensible. He is jealous of David. It's not hard to understand. Many of us like to excel. We like to contribute and we like our contribution to be recognised. It isn't attractive but it is understandable that we sometimes resent it when somebody else's contribution receives greater recognition than ours – especially when we've been doing what we do for years and some Johnny come lately is now enjoying all the applause. The proper answer is to do the best we can for God, irrespective of what other people may do themselves or think about us, and to seek for no reward.

Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest;  
To give, and not to count the cost,  
to fight, and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil, and not to seek for rest,  
to labour, and not to ask for any reward,  
save that of knowing that we do thy will.

### December 4<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 18 vv 10-16

Whatever was wrong with Saul, David's playing at first soothed him. Now it annoys him. Maybe he had some sort of mental illness which got worse. Maybe Saul can't any longer enjoy David's music because he is embittered against him by jealousy. The Bible speaks of the work of an evil spirit. I think all these explanations are plausible and I don't see them as exclusive. Saul may be insanely jealous or his jealousy might be making his insanity worse. There could be a vicious circle in operation here – insanity leading to ruined relationships, ruined relationships making the illness worse. Both the jealousy and the illness are evil in their different ways and evil may well be spiritually personified as it is in the Devil.

### December 5<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 18 vv 17-21

To marry the king's daughter was one of the promised rewards for beating Goliath. Now David cashes in. Saul's older daughter, however, marries someone else and David gets the younger daughter Michal. We're told that Michal loved David. Maybe Merab already loved Adriel whom she did marry or perhaps Saul thought his older daughter was too good for a shepherd boy. We're not told, but I'm interested by the fact that these are obviously arranged marriages but that love is mentioned as a significant point. In modern Britain we hear of forced marriages (particularly in the Asian community) and forced marriage is always wrong. You must consent to a marriage for it to be valid. There seems nothing wrong in principle in an arranged marriage, provided that both parties freely agree. The parties in an arranged marriage may already love one another or they may come to love one another. It may not always be clear, however, that an arranged marriage is not forced if the young people are impressionable and their parents over-bearing. Marriages based exclusively on romantic love, on the feelings couples have for one another at the outset, don't always last. There must be many marriages in our own culture that have been "arranged" at least in the sense that the couple have been brought together by well wishers, just as some infatuated couples have been put off marriage by appalled family members or friends who can see only disaster in their relationship. When we had a marriage preparation course in the parish I sometimes used to wonder how much of what we taught couples was fundamental to Christian marriage and how much was simply a reflection of our personal experience in the contemporary West?

### December 6<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 18 vv 22-30

Anyway, Saul's idea in offering David Michal's hand seems to have been to get David into a fight with the Philistines which he would surely lose and which would cost him his life. Saul plots. David fights bravely. Michal loves David. All these people make moral choices for which they are responsible. War and politics carry on as they always have. Yet, in the providence of God all these events are tending towards the day when David will be King of Israel and ultimately towards the day when Jesus will be born in Bethlehem.



December 7<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 19 vv 1-7

Saul wants his son Jonathan to be king after him, but Jonathan is David's man. They are firm friends and Jonathan knows that David is God's choice. Friendship before ambition. That seems right to me, but it makes me wonder how people would get on in the world. If the nice guys don't put themselves forward, does that mean that the nasty guys get to run the place? I'd like to think that in an ideal world people would be chosen on merit and everyone would be pleased to see the right people in the positions for which they are best suited. In the real world, however, I imagine that it is often the most thrusting and ruthless who get to the top of any organisation. Now we need leaders with determination, people without principles ought not to be in positions of power. We are back to this question of how we select the people to whom we give authority over us.

December 8<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 19 vv 8-17

Michal also takes David's part against her father. Saul may be paranoid, but it doesn't mean that everyone hasn't got it in for him. Michal and David have an image in their house. Their religion isn't as pure as later orthodoxy will demand. Michal is prepared to deceive and lie to her father's soldiers in order to save her husband's life. This was a moral issue we considered on November 7<sup>th</sup> with regard to the choice of Saul as king. Saul is very foolish not to trust David and to reject the love of his family and friends. He is wrong not to trust God and throw himself on God's mercy. So Saul gets deeper into trouble. And God uses Saul's folly, Jonathan's loyalty, Michal's deceit, the soldiers' incompetence and Samuel's faithfulness to bring about His goal – the setting of David on the throne of Israel.

December 9<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 19 vv 18-24

*Is Saul also among the prophets?*

When we first came across this phrase Saul's prophesying or "speaking in tongues" was a way of confirming God's Spirit's presence with him when he had just been anointed. Here his prophesying is involuntary and humiliating. It is a parody of his former position as the LORD's anointed and renders him helpless to catch David. Some people seek spiritual experiences for their own sake, but what matters is to serve God and other people selflessly, not for any reward, even that of an experience of God.

December 10<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 20 vv 1-10

These stories in I and II Samuel are a real pleasure to read. Often in the Bible there is very little detail and very little indication of the personalities and character development of the people involved, but these are stories with which it is easy to empathise. You can imagine the ancient Hebrews telling them round their camp fires and passing them on to their children. How much do we share the stories of what God has done and is doing with our Christian friends and with those who do not yet believe? How good are we at passing on these stories to our children? Not very good in a society in which Religious Education means Comparative Religion (learning about other peoples' stories as much as our own, but committing to nothing) and Church and Sunday School have such a low priority in the busy lives even of Christian families. The reason it is important to know the Bible story is that it is our story. It makes us the people we are. A nation which forgets its story forgets who it is. A Church that doesn't know the Christian story is a coming together of a group of individuals each one there for what he or she gets out of it. It is small wonder if such churches wither and die.

December 11<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 20 vv 11-23

Jonathan knows that David is the next king. He finds it hard to believe that his father would kill a fine man like David, but, if he tries, Jonathan knows which side he is on. Family loyalty is very important, but it takes second place to doing what is right. David promises to look after Jonathan and his descendants, which will become important later in the story when Saul and Jonathan are both dead and David is King of Israel.

December 12<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 20 vv 24-34

There seems to have been a monthly feast at the new moon, though nowhere in the Bible is this prescribed. As a courtier (not yet officially an outlaw because nothing has been proclaimed publicly) David should have been there. Saul probably thought David's presence at the festival would be an opportunity for him to lay his hands on him. Jonathan made what might have been a valid excuse (if it had been true) for David's absence – family business. Saul's violent reaction convinced Jonathan that David's fears were justified.

### December 13<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 20 vv 35-42

If they had stuck to the original plan, Jonathan would have given David the signal, but they would not have met. But they were too much friends to depart like that. They could not but take the risk of a face to face meeting. There is something in our humanity which makes it essential to meet in the flesh as well as text or phone, e mail or write letters. In the same way, we need to meet together for worship as well as to pray alone, to commune with nature or watch *Songs of Praise*. It is often easier to talk or write without meeting, but it is insufficient where relationships really matter. Communication is more than imparting information. Communication with a friend or lover, with God or a fellow Christian, is a sharing of yourself.

### December 14<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 21 vv 1-7

David really is in the process of becoming an outlaw now. It is clear that he will be killed if Saul gets hold of him. He needs to hide. He needs weapons and he needs men. He also needs rations. Ahimelech the priest realises that David is no longer working for Saul, but he is willing to help him. Everybody likes David and everybody knows that David ought to be king. The only food at the shrine is the bread which has been offered to God. Common sense prevailing, Ahimelech allows David's men to have this, provided that they themselves are pure. Jesus refers to this incident in the New Testament to justify using common sense in the observance of the Sabbath when faced by excessive legalism.

### December 15<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 21 vv 8&9

David had earned the right to bear Goliath's sword. It had obviously been laid up at the shrine, dedicating the victory to God. We lay up regimental standards in churches. Likewise scout banners. Certain objects symbolise our loyalties and commitments, our fellowships and friendships, our dedication to causes. It is fitting to see all our loyalties and commitments in the light of our commitment to God.

### December 16<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 21 vv 10-15

David wasn't safe where Saul could reach him. So he sought refuge with the Philistine ruler Achish of Gath. Effectively he would have been a mercenary soldier. We would rather not consider what would have happened if Achish had commanded David to fight against Israel. This did not happen, however. Achish knew David's reputation for fighting against the Philistines and might well have killed him there and then. David escaped by feigning madness. There was a superstitious terror of mad people which meant that Achish did not want a madman in his household, but neither did he dare to kill him. So David got away.

There is an interesting curiosity about this story. One eccentric translation of the difficult Hebrew describing David's feigned madness appears to suggest that David held himself in his hands. Some early commentators saw this as a kind of prophecy of the Last Supper when Jesus, the Son of David, took the bread and said, *This is my Body*. In other words, He held Himself in His Hands. You don't have to regard this as an article of the faith. I mention it as a curiosity.

### December 17<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 22 vv 1-4

David has to return to Israel and gathers a band of outlaws. He sends his elderly parents to safety in Moab. Many regimes are not above using family members as hostages. It is going on today in Iran. The lawyer who defended a woman sentenced to death by stoning was forced to flee the country, whereupon the Iranian authorities arrested his wife. You can see the appeal of exploiting family loyalty by threatening the families of people who are prepared to lay down their own lives in fighting an unjust government. If Hitler's parents were still alive in 1940 and we had captured them, would it have been legitimate to threaten to torture them unless Hitler called off the Blitz? Utilitarian ethics would justify such torture on the grounds that it would produce the greatest good for the greatest number, but it cannot be justified on religious grounds because every human being is of infinite worth, being made in the image of God and being a person for whom Christ died.

December 18<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 22 vv 5-8

Israel consisted of twelve tribes. Alliances shifted, but Judah seems to have stood out from the rest. So David (on Gad's advice) went to live with his own tribe of Judah and Saul sought to exploit the loyalty of his own tribe of Benjamin. He pointed out that the Benjaminites ought to be loyal to Saul, because there were likely to be more official favours for them under Saul's regime than under any putative government presided over by David.

In a novel I read recently a council planning officer was castigated for using his position with the council to repay a favour an old friend had done him. He replied that there was an important distinction between doing a favour for friends and actual corruption. With my cynicism about local government, it seemed to me that this distinction could only exist in the officer's imagination. Surely decisions ought to be taken purely on their merits, without fear or favour. On the other hand, human communities are based on the swapping of favours. *You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours*. Years ago, when there was a bread strike, many bakers insisted on selling what bread they had to their regular customers. They refused people who normally went to the supermarket for their bread. Where bakers did sell on a *first come, first served* basis, regular customers were aggrieved to find that their loyalty had counted for nothing and the bread had been sold out to strangers. We expect our own loyalty to be repaid, but we scent corruption when people with power seem to favour their friends. Would we expect a prime minister to find government jobs for his family? (Suppose one of the Miliband brothers becomes PM.) Would we expect him to find government jobs only for his own political party? Or for his friends within the party? Would we expect government contracts to be awarded to the prime minister's friends? What if the prime minister's friends awarded the contracts were also generous donors to charity? We think these issues are clear when we are standing on our soap boxes, but they are not always as clear as we think. I was once accused of corruption when I said I would ask someone I knew as a friend to do jobs around the church and would be grateful if he didn't charge the full rate.

December 19<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 22 vv 9&10

If we're talking about loyalty and gut reactions, I regard Doeg's betrayal of Ahimelech as pretty despicable. He was apparently at the shrine to worship. He chanced to observe Ahimelech helping David. And now he gave him away. Of course, from another perspective, Saul was the legitimate ruler and Doeg was providing him with the intelligence he needed to safeguard his realm. Was David a terrorist or a freedom fighter? We're all on David's side, but it was probably less clear to the people who lived through these events.

We are increasingly asked to be prepared to report our neighbours who break the law – benefit fraud, tax evasion, dog fouling, etc. Informants are promised confidentiality. We urge victims to report bullies, wife beaters or rapists to the authorities. Most of us would report serious crimes like murder or substantial theft. But we are also urged to report anti-social behaviour and minor crimes and even people behaving what we consider to be suspiciously. Yet nobody likes a grass!

My thought is that maintaining law and order is extremely important and good people ought to support the authorities in prosecuting crime. That includes being prepared to report a crime or to act as a witness. On the other hand, it is corrosive of community if we are all spying on one another, if we feel we can't trust our peers and are always looking to the authorities to protect us from our neighbours. So I should say, Report serious crimes (violence and dishonesty) but generally either ignore minor misdemeanours or deal with them yourself. But I should also say that we ought not to be overregulated. The state does not have to control every aspect of our lives. There is no need for every misdemeanour to be treated as a crime. Communities should be allowed some leeway to settle their own issues without official intervention.

December 20<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 22 vv 11-23

Killing the priests is sacrilege. The fact that Saul orders this shows how far gone he is from his vocation as an Israelite. His Israelite servants won't obey him. There is higher law than that of the state!

## December 21<sup>st</sup>

I Samuel 23 vv 1-15

These are really confused times. The Philistines attack Keilah and, guided by God, David saves the inhabitants. He is not only protecting Keilah as a good action in itself; he is establishing himself as the man who can protect (and therefore rule) the kingdom. But the inhabitants of Keilah still respect (or at least fear) Saul and are prepared to hand David over to him. War and civil war lead to all kinds of confusion and anarchy. We ought not to neglect the petition

Give peace in our time, O Lord,

Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God.

Once peace and stability are lost to a nation, they are very hard to restore as our newspapers demonstrate every day.

## 22<sup>nd</sup> December

I Samuel 23 vv 19-29

David and his men were hiding in the wilderness but the Ziphites decided to give him away to Saul. Freedom fighter or terrorist? Were the Ziphites traitors to David or loyal to Saul? How do we decide? There is a great deal to be said for respecting the existing government even if it is very bad. Once order is overthrown, it is very difficult to get it back. The French Revolution started in idealism, but led to the Reign of Terror, the rise of Napoleon and decades of European war. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was launched in idealism, but led to Stalinism, the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and much of Asia and the Cold War. Normally it is right to support and to pray for the existing government, but there is such a thing as a just revolution. It takes a lot of soul-searching to decide if and when it is right to support an insurgency. Most of us, I guess, would have supported the plot to kill Hitler, but which side to take in all those 1970s South and Central American civil wars between right wing dictators and communist revolutionaries? And what if we'd lived there? Or been vicars or bishops there? It sometimes seemed that on the one hand you had atheist revolutionaries who were trying to improve the conditions of the poor versus right wing military dictators who supported the institutional Church but were content to let the poor die in squalor. Both sides dealt short shrift to their enemies and conscientious Christians could find themselves in the middle. At least one archbishop (Oscar Romero) was martyred.

## 23<sup>rd</sup> December

I Samuel 24 vv 1-22

When I first went cycling in the Holy Land, we came to a sign pointing to Engedi. I realised why David would stay there with his men. It is an oasis in a barren desert. My feeling about visiting Israel is not so much the holy places they show pilgrims and tourists. These tend to be overcrowded and over commercialised and I'm sceptical about the authenticity of some of them. It is getting a feel for the shape of the land and the reason why things happened as they are described in the Bible. It is of course a very wonderful feeling to be in the place where all these events occurred and where these heroes of our faith walked, especially Jesus. It is about deepening our feeling for and understanding of the Christian story. It is obviously not necessary to visit the Holy Land. God is equally everywhere. I would recommend it, though, if you get the chance.

Now the point of this story is again that Saul is humiliated and David is protected. The point is made, however, that even David must not kill the LORD's anointed and should not mock him. The beheading of Charles I in 1649 appalled people and was perhaps the beginning of the end for the Commonwealth. These men were regicides. They had killed the Lord's anointed. For all Charles' faults and for all the public sympathy there was for the parliamentarians' cause, killing the king was a step too far. Human societies need the order that only authority can bring and, if we believe in God, we believe that authority derives from God, even when it is abused. We respect authority. Authority is answerable to God. The Church of England formulates its view on the subject in the Collect for the Queen.

ALMIGHTY God, whose kingdom is everlasting, and power infinite: Have mercy upon the whole Church; and so rule the heart of thy chosen servant ELIZABETH, our Queen and Governor, that she (knowing whose Minister she is) may above all things seek thy honour and glory; and that we, and all her subjects (duly considering whose authority she hath) may faithfully serve, honour, and humbly obey her, in thee, and for thee, according to thy blessed Word and ordinance; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

December 24<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 25 vv 1-13

What is going on here? David seems to expect Nabal to give his men something. Is he asserting the authority to tax? Is he offering protection? Does he expect people in his territory to support him? Certainly Nabal is regarded as foolish to turn him way. In fact the name Nabal means “fool”. David has to have material support and he is going to be king. He is prepared to enforce his rights at the point of a sword. This is life in a country where authority is not established. An example today would be Somalia. Often the choice in Africa seems to lie between anarchy (in which the strong take what they want from the weak) and a strong leader who ruthlessly enforces his rule and quickly becomes corrupted by power. They need our prayers and our support in establishing stable, just government.

December 25<sup>th</sup> (Christmas Day)

I Samuel 25 vv 14-31

Christmas is a big feast for us. Sheep-shearing, like Harvest Festival, would have been an important festival in an agricultural society. Human beings are not purely functional. We need celebration and rejoicing. Nabal’s people are celebrating the sheep-shearing and it seems to be generally agreed by everyone except the foolish Nabal that David and his men should be invited to share in the celebration. When they are excluded, David is ready to shed blood. It is Abigail who makes peace, by sharing the good food and drink with David and his men and persuading him not to take up the sword. Christmas is the birthday of the Son of David, the Prince of Peace. Our Christmas celebrations ought to be deep and wide – deep in the depth of our Communion with Christ, wide in our embrace of all God’s people.

December 26<sup>th</sup> (St Stephen)

I Samuel 25 vv 32-38

David thanked Abigail for not only providing food and drink for his men to celebrate, but also for saving him from shedding blood. It is hard to imagine how we could foreswear the possibility of violence in this present wicked world without risking being overrun by the forces of evil and leaving the weak defenceless, but violence must always be a last resort and used with the utmost reluctance.

Give peace in our time, O Lord,

Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God.

December 27<sup>th</sup> (St John)

I Samuel 25 vv 39-44

Nabal died. He must have been a trial to Abigail and to his servants. David was glad not to have killed him, but he wasn’t sorry he was dead. I remember a long time ago being told a story by a good Christian woman about another woman who had become pregnant by a man other than her husband. What to do? The husband had been away (probably in the forces) and would know the baby wasn’t his. Would it be right to expect him to accept that his wife had been unfaithful and to bring up another man’s child? What if he ill-treated his wife? What about a divorce? Well, this story goes back to the days when divorce was legally difficult, infrequent and generally frowned upon. Could she have an abortion? That too was then illegal and generally regarded as unethical, especially by Christians for whom the unborn child was still a child of God. [As I write this I am conscious that things are so much easier nowadays, but are we really better off living in a world in which fornication and adultery are nothing to be ashamed of, marriage vows are easily broken and marriages dissolved, and the killing of an embryo or foetus is simply the easy way out of an unwanted pregnancy?] Anyway the end of my story is that this good Christian woman said that everyone was thankful because the baby miscarried and so the husband never found out. Abortion would have been a sin, but a miscarriage was an act of God! I’m still a bit shocked more than forty years after I first heard the story, but there is an important moral difference between not being sorry for a death and actually killing. I wouldn’t have killed Hitler in 1930, but I wouldn’t have been sorry if he had died. I wouldn’t perform an act of euthanasia on a person dying slowly and painfully, but I might well be thankful to God for taking him by natural causes. I wouldn’t procure an abortion, but I can imagine a woman being relieved by a miscarriage.

December 28<sup>th</sup> (Holy Innocents)

I Samuel 26 vv 1-25

Those Ziphites give David away again. Again he refuses to kill the LORD’s anointed. Again Saul is humiliated. But, as in the story of the Cave of Adullam, even Saul acknowledges that David has done no wrong and that his own conduct is irrational. Everybody knows that David is the future king and God is directing events to this end.

December 29<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 27 vv 1-12

This is chapter which seldom gets read in church. David's conduct seems morally dubious. Concluding that he cannot be safe in Saul's Israel, he goes back to dwell with the Philistine Achish Ruler of Gath. He is allowed to live semi-independently in Ziklag and lives by raiding Israel's old enemies, but he tells the Philistines that he is raiding Israel. He kills all the inhabitants of the places he conquers in order to ensure that there is no one to tell any tales. They were dreadful times and there are parts of the world where things are not much different today. International bodies like the UN try to bring peace. Western governments sometimes intervene as NATO did in the former Yugoslavia. But all sorts of questions are raised as to what moral authority we have to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, whether we want to risk the lives of our young men and women sorting out other peoples' problems and whether even the wealthy West has the resources to bring peace and justice to places like Afghanistan? We pray. We discuss. We vote. Maybe we serve in our countries' armed forces. Maybe we back our Governments' policies or maybe we try to get them changed. The problems appear intractable, but we Christians have a responsibility as lights of the world, the salt of the earth and the yeast which is supposed to leaven the lump.

December 30<sup>th</sup>

I Samuel 28 vv 1-25

There is to be a great battle between the Philistines and Israel. David nearly finds himself fighting on the wrong side, but this chapter is really about Saul. Saul has become desperate. He has fallen out with his best general, David. He is the despair of his family and friends. He has lost his relationship with God and feels utterly alone. Yet he still does have the loyalty of his friends if only he could see it and I am sure that he could have returned to God if only he would. Endor is the apotheosis. In his earlier zeal for God, Saul had ordered an end to witchcraft and magic, but, now, at the end of his resources, he can't think of anything else to do, but to ask a medium to bring back the prophet Samuel from the dead. Some people today go to séances. I believe that most mediums are either deliberate frauds or else they are as much deluding themselves as they are their clients. This story does, however, demonstrate two things. It is not completely impossible to communicate with the dead but it is also wrong to do so. All Samuel can tell him is that it is all true. The Israelites will lose the battle and Saul and his sons will shortly be joining Samuel. Saul is plunged into despair and refuses even to eat. But, nevertheless, his servants and even the medium offer him kindness. If only he could have accepted the love of other people and the love of God.

December 31<sup>st</sup>

I Samuel 31 vv 1-13

I've left out chapters 29 & 30 which explain why David didn't fight for the Philistines and what he was doing while Saul was battling to save Israel. Read them if you like for completeness.

Chapter 31 is the story of the end of Saul and his hopes to be succeeded by his son Jonathan. The Israelites are completely defeated in battle by the Philistines. We are right back to where we were at the First Battle of Ebenezer when Eli's sons were killed and the Ark was captured. Saul is so desperate that he asks his armour bearer to kill him and then kills himself when the man won't do it. Saul's three fine sons are killed, leaving the pathetic Ishbosheth to carry on the dynasty – but that is another story. The Philistines dishonour Saul by the way they treat his body. The men of Jabesh Gilead do what they can to put this right, partly for the honour of Israel, but also, I like to think, because of their abiding affection for Saul.

The Book of I Samuel has given us a lot to think about, about Providence and human responsibility, about the exercise of authority and about friendship and loyalty. It has taught us something about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It has introduced David, whose story and accomplishments continue in II Samuel, and, in doing so, has given us something of the context for the story of great David's greater Son.

I am sorry it ends on a down note, but that is what human stories tend to do. It was Enoch Powell who said *All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs.* In the end, the flesh fails, but our confidence is in God. It is God Who will bring our story to glorious fruition.