

King David

A Sermon by Richard Bauckham
(Trinity College, Cambridge, chapel, 28 Oct 2012)

Readings

2 Samuel 23:1-7 (REB)

Acts 13:13-23

I see that David comes at the centre of your sermon series on the story of Israel, and very appropriately. That David is a pivotal figure in the story of the whole Bible we can see by the amount of space the Old Testament devotes to telling his story: some sixty chapters, which is two-thirds as much as the New Testament devotes to telling the story of Jesus, eighty-nine chapters in the four Gospels all together. David's only rival for importance in the Old Testament's story of Israel is Moses, but we do not really get to know Moses in the intimate way we do David. In those sixty chapters David appears in a remarkable number of roles: a shepherd boy, a military hero, a musician and poet, a devoted friend, a lover of several women, an astute politician, a dispenser of justice, a founder of religious institutions, an adulterer and murderer, an indulgent and heart-broken father, and, throughout all these roles and however paradoxically, a man devoted to God, the king God chose because he was, said God, 'a man after my own heart.' The story of David in 1 and 2 Samuel is brilliantly narrated, genuinely a great read because David emerges as a truly complex character, one who can puzzle and surprise us, who wins our admiration and our outrage too, a hero who is also a tragic figure. And that's without mentioning the Psalms, so many of which are ascribed to David, even if most were written in the tradition of David rather than by David himself. There is far too much of David for me to do more than suggest you read the story yourselves. After all, it's one of the classics of world literature, and David is one of the iconic figures of western culture.

But why is he in the Bible? Or, rather, why is he so important in the Bible? The answer has to lie not simply in the story of David itself but rather in its place as a key stage in the story the whole Bible has to tell, the grand metanarrative of Scripture which unfolds God's purpose for his whole creation. The God of Jesus, the Trinitarian God of the Christian tradition, is irrevocably the God of Israel, who chose, strange as it might seem, this particular people for a unique role in the unfolding of his purpose of salvation for the world. In the context of that story, we can grasp the pivotal significance of David best by thinking about the notion of king in the Bible, for David's enduring significance was as the king after God's own heart. If you read back just before the story of David, you will discover just how ambiguous the notion of a king is in the Bible. God gave Israel their first king, Saul, the king David later replaced, because the people demanded a king, so that they could be like all the other nations. The prophet Samuel warned them in no uncertain terms of the evils of oppression by despotic rulers. Why should the people who, uniquely, had the Lord God as their king desire a human king? Could any human being be safely entrusted with so much power?

From then onwards, there's an implicit question in the story of Israel and in the writings of the prophets who wrestled with the twists and turns of their people's

turbulent love affair with God. The implicit question is: can there really be a human king who is fit to rule, a king to whom God could delegate God's rule? The first experiment certainly turned out badly. Saul so far fails to live up to his vocation from God that God himself rejects him and makes, as it were, a completely fresh start, with 'a man after God's own heart,' a man he can trust to be truly devoted to him and to implement his righteous rule over his people - David. And David gets to be king in spite of his resolute refusal to lift a hand against Saul, definitely a good start. God gives him the kingdom and David never forgets that. He turns out to be a great man in many ways, no doubt about it.

But then, when his failures come, it has to be said they are despicable. When David sins it is no ordinary person's failure, for David abuses precisely his God-given power as king to gratify his lust and to cover up his crime: he takes another man's wife, Bathsheba the wife of Uriah, and then, having failed to pass off her child as Uriah's, he has Uriah placed in the front line of battle where he is bound to be killed. Yet - and here the story perhaps really surprises us - God, furious with David though he is, does not reject him as he did Saul. David, repentant, pays for his crimes, but not with his kingdom. God makes an 'eternal' covenant with him to the effect that he will never remove the kingdom from David's house, that is, not just David but David's descendants. Even allowing that the Old Testament sometimes uses that term 'eternal' in a less than absolute sense, as we read on the rather sorry history of so many of David's successors, only a few of whom emerge as worthy successors, we begin to wonder whether an eternal covenant with David's house was a terribly good idea. Why did God tie his hands, so to speak, so that, when David's descendants proved in the end intolerable failures, he couldn't, as it were, start over all over again, as he had when he replaced Saul with David?

Let's leave that question hanging for a moment, while we focus a little on the role of the king in Israel. Of course, the king had a variety of roles, but the essential one, the one the prophets stress when they critique the monarchy, was justice. The king was the guarantor of a just society. Crucially, the one thing that justified the king's supreme power was that he could use it on behalf of those who might not otherwise get justice, the weaker members of society, the poor, the widows, the orphans, the foreigners - to take the typical cases the Old Testament so often refers to. Such people were so easily at the mercy of powerful people who could manipulate the judiciary, but the supreme power of the king enabled him to intervene to guarantee them their rights. Justice in the Old Testament very often has that connotation of a well-ordered society in which the weak are protected and the powerful and influential are not allowed to dominate to their own unjust advantage. The king was the lynch-pin of such a system, and the prophets treat the power of the monarch as justified only if they play that role. And, very importantly, they see just rule in that sense as a reflection of the righteous rule of God himself. Such a king is indeed a man after God's own heart.

It's in that light that we should read those last words of David that formed our first reading. David speaks there of the one who rules people in justice and who rules in the fear of God - the two things are closely connected. Only the king who truly acknowledges God to be God, the God whose will embodies justice and

must be wholeheartedly respected and obeyed – only such a king can rule justly, for otherwise he will fall for the terrible temptations of power. Those are the key features of good rule – to rule justly and in the fear of God – and David the poet has a lovely picture of the effect of such a ruler on his kingdom: Such a king

is like the light of morning at sunrise,
a morning that is cloudless after rain
and makes the grass from the earth sparkle.

To the Israelite farmer that picture would be not merely beautiful but heart-warmingly encouraging, for the warm sun on well watered soil was precisely what crops needed, what a family's whole livelihood depended on. And if David's contrasting picture of the ungodly sounds harsh to our ears, we should at least see the significance of the metaphor. Briars, with their thorns so vicious no one would tackle them by hand, were what had to be cleared away if the earth was to produce the crops people needed. So the good ruler is the one who makes it possible for his people to live and to flourish.

Well, in the history of Israel, David, despite his failures, was the best approximation to such an ideal, and it was as such that he was remembered and held up as the standard by which later kings were judged good or bad. As it turned out, mostly bad, and therefore the question: can there really be a human being fit to reflect the rule of God as we have hoped? The scriptures of Israel do not put the question explicitly, but they attempt an answer – or perhaps two answers. They answer it by looking forward to the coming of the kingdom of God himself in the future, the time when they will not have to rely on all too human rulers, but God himself will come to rule his people and his world in a way that finally tackles the evils of the world effectively. But they also look back in order to look forward: they remember David, the king after God's own heart, and they glimpse the possibility of a new and better David, the ideal David, a human king so perfectly a man after God's own heart that his rule will indeed be God's own rule. Such a man, such a son of David, proves to be the real goal of God's eternal covenant with David.