

“Give Us a King!”

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1 Samuel 8:1-20 Mark 3:19b-21, 31-35

Some people say you shouldn't mix religion and politics. And in many ways that's true. Just because someone claims to be a person of faith doesn't mean he or she knows what policies or practices would be best for a community or a people to follow. People of faith take opposite stands on all sorts of issues, from economics to immigration to the environment to war. And they are subject to corruption the same as everyone else. Our scriptures give us broad principles to follow, but that doesn't mean everyone who believes will follow them, or agree on how to put them into practice. Still, the Bible has a lot more to say about politics than most people are aware of. And we would do well to pay attention.

In the scripture lesson that Vicky read from 1 Samuel this morning, the people of Israel were looking for political change. This was a time of transition for them. Until this point, they had depended on charismatic tribal leaders to serve as judges and lead them in fighting their enemies. And it was a rather haphazard system, as it says in the book of Judges (17:6), “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

Besides that, most of the neighboring people were organizing themselves into monarchies, with a single king uniting many tribes. And that system seemed to be bringing them military advantages. Plus, the well-respected prophet and judge at the time, Samuel, was getting old. Samuel had appointed his own sons to take over, but they were both corrupt, taking bribes and perverting justice. So the people decided it was time for a change. They came to Samuel and said, “You are old and your sons do not follow your ways; appoint for us a king to govern us, like the other nations.”

Now Samuel didn't like this idea. After all, he was still in power, and he had already chosen his sons to take over for him. So he prayed to God. And God said, don't take it personally. The people have always been like this; even after I delivered them from Egypt, they served other gods and went their own way. Still, God told Samuel to listen to them and give them what they wanted. Only he should warn them first, what it would be like to have a king rule over them.

Now, it's interesting that in an earlier book of the Bible, Deuteronomy, Moses already gave the people permission to have a king. He said, “When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settle in it... you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose.” But there were some restrictions. It had to be someone from their own community, not a foreigner. And the king wasn't allowed to have too many horses, or too many wives, or to acquire great quantities of silver and gold for himself. And he should have his own copy of the law, and read it every day. He was not to think of himself more highly than the other members of the community, and he was to keep the commandments of God. (17:14-20).

So Moses gave the people permission to have a king. Then why would Samuel be against it? Maybe there was more to it than just a personal matter. In Deuteronomy it

seems the people received permission to have a king during a time of peace, after they had come into the land and taken possession of it. And in times of peace, it's easier to put limits on the power of the monarchy. The king is one of the people who follows the ways of God.

In Samuel, it seems the people wanted a more powerful figure.* At first they simply asked for "a king to govern us like the other nations." (v. 5). But after Samuel warned that the king would just take from them, they still insisted. They said, "... We are determined to have a king over us, so that we may also be like the other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles." The people were anxious about foreign enemies, and they wanted military power and security. And in times of war and threat of war, it's easier for a king to get caught up in his power and take advantage of the people.

So Samuel warned them. He told them a king would not only take their sons to fight wars, but also to plow his fields and reap his harvest, and to make chariots and weapons. He would take their daughters to cook and bake and be perfumers. Who would the perfume be for? The king would also take part of their land and their harvest and their livestock and their slaves, and turn the people into slaves themselves. And that's what did happen eventually. By the time Solomon was established as king, he had fourteen hundred chariots, twelve thousand horses, loads of silver (I Kings 10:26-27), seven hundred foreign princesses as wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). I guess they needed a lot of perfume. Here we have a case of excessive wealth concentrated at the top, while the common people ended up as slaves to the rich.* Exactly what Samuel warned against.

In many ways Solomon was a wise and good king. But all this wealth and all those women turned Solomon's heart from God and caused great trouble in the kingdom (1 Kings 11). When people are feeling insecure and longing for peace and security, we still have to be careful not to give too much power to those who will be tempted to abuse it. And all human beings are tempted at times to abuse power, if we have it.

The first king Samuel anointed was Saul. Saul turned out to be a successful warrior, and he didn't take too much from the people. But he didn't always listen to Samuel or obey God. The last straw came when Samuel told Saul to attack the Amalekites and utterly destroy everything they found. That's not considered ethical today, but back then it was one of their practices of war, that would eliminate greed as a motivation for fighting. But Saul would often take matters into his own hands and do his own thing. Instead of destroying everything, Saul and his men kept some of the best sheep and cattle and things that were valuable. Samuel heard about it, and came to Saul in anger. And Saul greeted him and said, "I have carried out the command of the Lord!" He didn't seem to understand that what he did was wrong. But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?" (15:14). And Saul answered, the people kept those to sacrifice to the Lord your God. But Samuel didn't buy that. He said, "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.... (and) Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, God has also rejected you from being king." (14:22-23). And it says that after that, "Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel."

Clearly being a good warrior is not all it takes to be a good leader. You also have to listen to people who are wise and obey God's ways.

We no longer live in an age of kings, but the same principles apply to any of our leaders today. We have to be careful not to act rashly and give too much power to any leaders, especially when we are anxious about security, lest they exalt themselves over the common people and make excuses as to why they can neglect the ways of God. To act with integrity, justice and truth is more important than power and possessions. May we all walk in God's ways, and trust that God will lead us. Amen.

* Credit to Robert Williamson, Jr., "The Politics of Military Consumerism – 1 Samuel 8:4-20" at Political Theology Today, www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-military-consumerism-1-samuel-8-4-20/.