

A sermon given on Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2018 at St Michael’s Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **1 Samuel 8:1-22a**, Mark 10:35-45

**Introduction: What makes a good leader?**

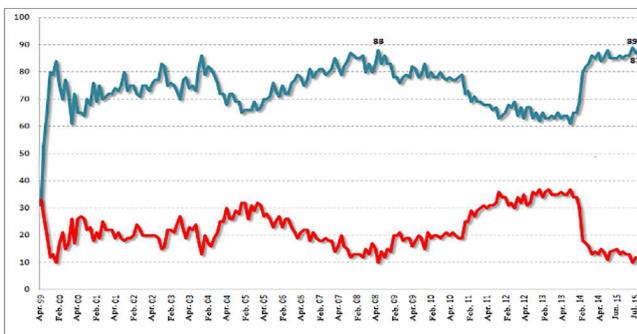
If you had to choose one of these 4 leaders to rule our country, which would you choose, and why?



1. Vladimir Putin
2. Angela Merkel
3. Jeremy Corbyn
4. Kim Jong Un

Who of all these 4 politicians do you think is the most popular?

According to the voters of the 4 countries where these politicians live, the most popular are Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un. Given that it’s not really an option in North Korea to vote against the Dear Leader, that makes Putin the most popular leader. And although there may be some degree of corruption in the Russian electoral process, market research of Putin’s popularity over the time he has been leader in Russia shows that he really is approved of by the majority of Russians. According to this chart, his ratings have never dropped below 60%.



*Vladimir Putin’s approval ratings, 1999-2015*

**The background to 1 Samuel 8**

You may be aware that the sermons this summer will mainly be looking at the story of ancient Israel from the prophet Samuel to King Solomon. If you haven’t already, please have a read of the introduction to this series on page of this month’s newsletter. Last week we heard about the calling of the prophet Samuel. This week we fast-forward to the end of Samuel’s life. Samuel has been acting as the leader of the nation, also known as the judge, but now the prophet is growing old, and the people are not happy about his succession plan, which is to hand over to his 2 sons.

**Approximate dates:**

- c. 1280 Exodus from Egypt
- c. 1240 Conquest of Canaan
- c. 1220-1050 Period of the Judges**
- c. 1050 Saul anointed as first king

*based on The New Bible Atlas (IVP, 1985)*

This chart gives a rough idea of where our story comes in the history of the nation.

The period of the Judges saw the fortunes of the nation going through some difficult

moments, as they kept worshipping the gods of the nations around them, getting attacked by their enemies, and then being rescued by a temporary leader known as a judge. At the end of the book of Judges, there is a civil war which nearly wipes out the tribe of Benjamin. This sorry state of affairs is summed up in the last verse of the book of Judges:

*“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”  
Judges 21:25*

### **Why the people wanted a king**

In today’s reading, a deputation of leaders from the 12 tribes of Israel come to Samuel and ask him to appoint a king to rule them. The reasons they give in 8:4 could be summed up under the following points;

- Desire for strong leadership and authority (lack of confidence in current system)
- Tired of corruption (Samuel’s sons were taking bribes)
- Wanting to copy other nations (the grass looked greener over the fence)

Samuel is cross and feels personally hurt, but God tells him to grant the people’s request, provided he gives them a health warning about what it will be like having a king. Samuel does not mince his words. We can sum up his case against having a king in the following 3 points:

- Loss of personal freedom (verses 11-13, 17)
- King will acquire personal wealth at expense of people (14-17)
- This change would be irreversible (18)

To me, this looks rather a strange process on the face of it. God says that the basic problem is that the people have rejected him from being their king. The root of all the people’s problems is that they have failed to keep their side of the covenant with their God. If they had obeyed God’s laws and put him at the centre of their lives and their community, all would have been well. But God never forces us to obey him. He may allow us to suffer the consequences, but he will not undermine our free will. Having a king is plan B, but God is willing to let them have a go. And so, in the next chapter, Saul is anointed by Samuel and becomes the first king.

### **What about the Kingdom of God?**

This story could be a launchpad for discussion about political systems, and to critique our own from a biblical perspective. For example, one of the cornerstones of our democracy is the principle that individuals should be free to choose their own values and beliefs, and forge a life that suits their own preferences and desires. This sounds rather like the comment in the book of Judges that “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” And look what a mess it got them into!

A Christian evaluation of a liberal democracy will have to be a topic for a future sermon or discussion.

But I’d like to finish by asking what having God as our king means for us as individuals. Unlike a democracy, where the people make their own rules through the agency of the people they elect, a Kingdom is based on the idea that all authority rests with the king. The biblical story, as well as most of human history, shows how a good king can be a blessing to his people, but that in most cases human greed and the desire to exercise power over others lead to the exploitation of the people, especially the most vulnerable.

Do we dare to trust ourselves to God as our King? Do we think it’s best that we make the rules, or submit to the rules he created for the smooth running of the universe?

Here are a few questions that we could all do well to consider:

- What kind of King is Jesus?

In our gospel passage Jesus contrasts the way of human rulers, who “lord it over” their subjects, with his own mission “not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”. Jesus does not want to boss people around. He only wants the best for us. This is the Servant King whose love for each of us led him to die on the Cross, as we remember each week in Holy Communion.

- What would it mean to you to treat Jesus as your King?

Do you trust him to lead you in the way that is best for you, your family and the world? Do you believe that he really knows what is best for your life?

- Are you willing to submit to his authority?

This where the rubber hits the road. Obeying Jesus isn't about paying lip service to him in church. It's about making a commitment to do what he would do, to make changes in our own lives, i.e. in our behaviour and our ways of thinking, so that they reflect the values of his Kingdom. This leads on to another very practical question:

- Are you willing to put your possessions, talents and time at the disposal of your King? Put another way, would other people be able to see from the way you spend your money, how you spend your time and use your talents, that you were serious about being a follower of Jesus?

One of the big stumbling blocks for many people is that they think being a serious follower of Jesus means losing their personal freedom. I think there's a misconception here about freedom: in our culture, freedom means liberty to make your own decisions, to set your own rules, to be who you want and to live how you want. This kind of freedom has come to be seen as a basic right in our society. Instead of the State and society deciding how you should live, imposing out-dated moral values that limit your freedom, the individual chooses their own values and beliefs, and forges a life that suits their own preferences and desires. It is fundamentally individualistic and hedonistic. To put it in the words of the writer of the book of Judges, everyone does “what is right in their own eyes”. We don't need to look far to see the trail of broken relationships, hurt and exploitation, intended or not, that results from such a philosophy.

Of course, God gives us the freedom to make our own choices. We can choose to live a life that is centred around ourselves. Or we can freely choose to say no to some of our wants and desires in order to follow the example of Jesus, who put the will of his Father and the needs of others before his own interests. Doing so actually sets you free from preoccupation with yourself and enables you to discover what life is all about – what Jesus described as “life in all its fulness”.

I would suggest that before we make pronouncements on this or that political system or ideology, we ought first to decide on our own philosophy for life. Is it one where everyone does “what is right in their own eyes” or one where we build our lives on Jesus and his teaching, acknowledging him as Lord in everything we think, say and do, and putting ourselves, like him, at the service of the Kingdom of God? Do we want to become the people *God* wants us to be, or is it our ambition to be able to say “I did it *my way*”?

Who is King of your life?