

**St. Andrew's Cathedral**  
Jackson, Mississippi  
Sermon for June 10, 2018 ~ Proper 5B  
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Samuel, the great prophet who guided Israel, had grown old. The people of Israel came to him and told him they wanted to be governed by a king, like other nations in their region of the world. And, although Samuel reminded them that God is their King and warned them of the consequences of having a king over them, they continued to demand a monarchy. So, God gave them a king, Saul, and things were never the same again.

In some respects, what prompted this transition was Samuel's vulnerability in his advanced age. But Israel was also concerned about the threat of a Philistine invasion. Since Moses handed down the Law on Sinai, Israel's strength and protection had been in prophets, prayers, and covenants. But now, they weren't sure that offered enough security. So, now they wanted to be like other nations that looked to armies, chariots, and kings for protection.

That seems like a reasonable thing to ask, doesn't it? Maybe it seems so reasonable to us because we have lived so long with monarchical type arrangements, relying on government, the military, and the constitution to protect us. It is difficult for us as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans to imagine what it was like for the tribes of Israel to trust in God for everything. Such radical dependence and obedience are hard for us to comprehend.

But it may be that since that day we've pursued a balance that has interfered with our ability to trust in God, in spite of what our currency says.

The story certainly does provoke tension in us, doesn't it? Which god is the real object of my worship? The people of God were not intended to be like other people. Rather, Israel was to order its life in the odd and demanding ways of Torah and to rely on the unfathomable love and remarkable promises of God, the Sovereign of the universe and their particular Sovereign.

So, today's text from the Hebrew Scriptures tells us about a time when God's holy people decided that what was to set them apart from others would no longer be their radical and faithful obedience to the ways God had called them to walk in, but instead rely on the might of their armies, the strength of their weapons, and the prowess of their kings. They would get themselves a king and an army and show the world who was boss!

Fast-forward a few hundred years. Their plan having failed numerous times, the Jews were living under the occupation of Rome and its emperor. They were still looking for a king when Jesus appeared. To many, he looked like the man for the job. To his family, he looked like he'd lost his mind. To the religious and political establishment, he looked like a threat. But Jesus' came to proclaim the in-breaking of a realm over which God reigned in the hearts and minds of those who truly worship God.

They would be a people set apart by this distinction wherever they may be and under whatever secular government they lived. He said those who believed in him and trusted his message to be true would bring the influence of God wherever they went. They would be to the world what salt is to food, what light is to darkness, and what leaven is to a loaf of bread. They would not place their ultimate trust in earthly rulers, in chariots, and horses, and might, but in the power of the God of love, mercy, justice, and

compassion. His message was not about abolishing governments; it was about restoring a balance between eternal and temporal things, between who we are and whose we are, between what we want and what we need, between the sacred and the secular, between religious faith and political ideology. That kind of balance holds the potential and the power to transform corruption in governments, commerce, industry, agriculture, political parties, laws, and international relations. That kind of balance is grounded in Love Divine, not in getting what's mine. It's founded upon ancient values of justice and respect for one another, especially the most vulnerable among us. When that balance is lost, creation suffers. When it is restored, creation thrives. If we don't believe that, then we really don't believe the Gospel.

Christians are different and our ways are not the ways of the culture in which we live. Isn't that right? Isn't that what being friends with Jesus requires of us? Isn't it our vocation to be more of an influence on the world than the world is upon us? I'm reminded of the question once posed by a prominent preacher, "If you were tried for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

I missed an appointment last week and it really bothered me. Was I as bothered when I failed to show up for my daily appointment with God at morning or evening prayer? I lost some money in my retirement account when the stock market dropped. It worried me. If I'd lost my faith, would I have been as concerned? I'd rather not have to explore the answers to these questions.

You and I are called to place our greatest trust and highest loyalty in God. Doing that will sometimes make us different from everybody else. One of the ways we are different is that we are called to come here every week and listen to the ancient Word, which sometimes makes us feel uncomfortable about ourselves, and sometimes makes us feel better about ourselves. We are called to behave toward one another and to handle our differences in a way that is different from the gossipy, polarizing, divisive ways of others around us, so that when people see how our community functions, they will say, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if every community of people got along like they do?" And, we are also called to gather around this Table to participate in a covenant meal with God and one another - to remember who we are and whose we are - to be reformed, renewed, rebalanced, and reminded of what differentiates us before we go out into the world with everybody else. We are not supposed to be like everybody else!

Now, I do realize that there are ways Christians are sometime seen as different in a not particularly flattering or helpful way. For example, I was embarrassed for Christians everywhere when I stopped at an intersection here in Jackson. The car in front of me had a bumper sticker that said, "To Hell with our enemies. God bless America." While I acknowledge the man is at liberty in this country to express his particular, different-from-mine convictions, I have to admit I thought about setting up a sign out on Capitol Street that says, "If you come to our Cathedral, we'll talk to you about the Jesus who said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

I have to wonder sometimes if we are reluctant to embrace our distinctly Christian identity and way of life because we don't want to be mistaken for extremists. That's surely something to be careful about, but not a valid reason to pursue a course of being like everybody else. It's something we are called to struggle with every day we draw breath. I appeal to you, therefore, to keep up the struggle and don't lose heart, "because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 4:18-5:1 NRSV).