

I don't know if you're up to date on these things, but it turns out that there's going to be an election in the United States of America on the fifth of November this year. For many people that will be remembered as Guy Fawkes' Day, but for most Australians, that day will be celebrated as Melbourne Cup Day. (For the trivia buffs amongst you, the Melbourne Cup is held on the first Tuesday in November each year, and the US presidential election is held every four years on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November.)

In this country, we are blessed with peaceful elections and smooth transitions between governments. There was a fair amount of angst in 1975, of course, but we don't see the riots and upheavals that other countries have from time to time – let alone full-blown revolutions or military coups.

The US, at least for more than a hundred years leading up to the 2020 election, was much like us, and their constitution is designed to guarantee the “peaceful transfer of power.” After the 2000 election, as George W. Bush was coming into office, the outgoing Clinton administration staffers removed all the Ws from the computer keyboards... but that was topped by what happened after the 2020 election, which climaxed in the January 6th Capitol riots.

We can only pray that this year's election is more peaceful...

Our Old Testament reading today is about a transition of power too – and one which was destined to cause great turmoil in ancient Israel. Today's reading is the third in a series of snapshots of the history of God's people from the first book of Samuel. Two weeks ago, we looked at the call of Samuel, to be prophet and a judge. Last week, we heard about the people's demand for a king – a king like all the other nations had. We were reminded of why having a king was not a good idea, and we were reminded that the people demanded a king anyway.

The people wanted a king, and God gave them a king. In chapter 9, God spoke to Samuel “...I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over my people Israel...[Saul] is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people.” (1 Samuel 9:16-17), and then at the beginning of Chapter 10, Samuel poured a flask of oil on Saul's head, anointing him as king.

Following Saul becoming king, Samuel considered his work as a prophet and a judge done, and Chapter 12 records his farewell speech.

And, as I said last week, Saul was a good king. Until things went bad.

Over time, King Saul, in his self-importance and impatience, took on roles reserved for priests. He had decided that he could make his own rules; he was, after all, king. But as a result, God rejected him as king and in the opening verses of chapter 16 God directed Samuel to find a new king.

Finding a new king, while the old king is still very much in power, was fraught with danger. Grave danger.

God's directions put Samuel – who was now getting on in years - in immediate danger, because the road to Bethlehem - where God told him he would find the new king - led straight through the territory and city of Gibeah – Saul's capital. Saul would naturally want to know what business this now retired prophet and judge, had in going to Bethlehem. Telling him the truth would have been treason. So, God gave Samuel an excuse: “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’”

It was still a dangerous undertaking for Samuel. Even though Saul had proven himself unworthy of leading God's chosen people, he was still king. He had tremendous power – the power of life and death over his people. And people with power seldom like to give it up.

With a king like Saul, though, Israel's entire future was in jeopardy because they would naturally follow his lead and stop following God and obeying his commands (15:11). If that happened, Israel's mission to the nations of the world would be compromised, and all might be lost. The nation needed a new king – someone after God's own heart (13:14).

Samuel did what the Lord said, taking the heifer for sacrifice up the road to Bethlehem.

When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, "Do you come in peace?"

They may have had some inkling of what was going on. But Samuel was a prophet and a judge, and the elders would have known who he was, and been in awe that this great man who had arrived in what was the small village of Bethlehem – some trembling might be expected.

Samuel comforted them, though, saying, "Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me." Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

Jesse and his sons. Jesse and his seven sons. When Samuel saw the eldest, Eliab, he was sure that he was the one. After all, Eliab looked like Saul had as a young man, handsome and tall, an imposing figure, exactly what a king should be by the world's standards. "Surely, the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord." (16:6)

Eliab looked like the right one. Eliab looked like a king. But God said to Samuel: Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

And what matters in a leader, especially the leader of God's chosen people, is the leader's heart. Does that leader have a heart for God? More importantly, is this potential king a man after God's own heart?

In a way, Eliab would have been the easy choice. "He looks like a king. Let's make him king".

Then Jesse presented Abinadab and Shammah, and the other four, but none of them were who God was looking for. They might have all looked the part, but they weren't the right choice. I can imagine Samuel throwing his hands up in despair as he asked Jesse "Are these all the sons you have?"

"There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep."

And I can imagine Jesse scratching his head and realising there is another... "Oh yeah... but we left him at home looking after the sheep".

But Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." And we heard that Jesse sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features.

Of course, it wasn't just about appearances, but David was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features, but God saw in Jesse's eighth son, the shepherd David, something more, Samuel and the others present couldn't see it, but God could: David had a

heart for God. David wasn't just going to be a king. He wasn't just going to be a good king. But he was going to be God's king.

David was God's chosen servant; he would become famous and infamous, a warrior and a musician, a man after God's own heart and but also a man who would follow his own heart at times with disastrous results. And he would be the greatest king that the ancient people of Israel would ever see.

Then the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one."

¹³So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David.

Of course, the word we have as 'anointed' is the Hebrew word *messiach* or *messiah*, which we are even more familiar with as the Greek translation of 'Christ'. In anointing David, Samuel is, probably unknowingly, pointing to something – someone – more. And you've probably realised too, that the location of this anointing, Bethlehem, is also significant.

God chose the youngest – the least likely – of Jesse's sons to be his anointed. As we read the scriptures, we find that God often chooses the youngest, the weakest, the most foolish, the least significant or the least likely to do his work – Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:27-29): "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world... so that no one may boast before him." It's always about God, and not the king, or the president, or minister or whoever. It's always about God.

Our reading ends with Samuel going home. What an anticlimax: Samuel went to Ramah.

Samuel's leading part in the story was over. We've followed him from his call when he was a young apprentice to Eli, to his leading the people, anointing Saul, guiding Saul, and ultimately rebuking Saul and anointing his successor, David.

The transition from King Saul to King David would be traumatic one for the nation, but one which would ultimately bring about the heyday of ancient Israel.

The next verse after today's reading tells us "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him." And that seems rough, but Saul had already turned away from God. But even then David is called on to soothe Saul's tortured spirit by playing his shepherd's harp and to serve in Saul's army. Saul had no idea who David really was. Only Samuel and Jesse's family knew.

God is the centre of this story - not Saul, not Samuel, not even David. God rejects Saul, sends Samuel, carries out his plan, chooses David, and fills him with the Spirit. We see Jesus in this story over and over again, the town of Bethlehem, the least of Jesse's sons, a shepherd anointed to be King, the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him at the beginning of his work. All this, long before anyone knew the name Jesus.

There is a part of this story which is troubling, though, and it's in the second verse of our reading, "And the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel." And we can understand that at one level, can't we? Clearly, Saul wasn't the right person. But God chose him. And God regretted choosing him. So, did God make a mistake? Did God change his mind? And then we might be led to ask "Will God change his mind about saving us?"

Those are questions which do trouble us. Questions which cause divisions. Sometimes in scripture, God says that he does not change his mind (1 Samuel 15:29). But now here, God grieves as though he has made a mistake that he now regrets.

Many people have tried to explain this apparent contradiction. Or tried to explain it away. Others have ignored the bits they don't like. I can't give you a definitive explanation. But for me, it comes back to what I said last week, that history is made up of things that God makes happen, and things that God lets happen. The people wanting a king is something that God let happen. Saul turning away from God is something God let happen. But choosing David is something that God made happen. Sending Jesus is something God made happen.

We can go to the story of Jonah and Ninevah – God was going to destroy Ninevah, but the Ninevites repented, and “God saw what they did; he saw that they had given up their wicked behavior. So he changed his mind and did not punish them as he had said he would.” (Jonah 3:10, GNB)

But we can see, that even in these apparent changes of mind or regrets, God is being faithful to his people. God is faithful to us.

God will never change his mind regarding his plan to save the world through the Son of God who was the Son of David. God may change his mind about circumstances, but never about his promises.

I think we're very fortunate not to be part of the US election later this year. And I think we can be thankful for the political systems here. But we need to keep the story of Samuel, and Saul and Jesse and David in mind as we think about choosing leaders, in whatever context that may be. A prime minister. A premier. A church councillor. A minister. Don't fall for the easy choice. But make the right choice: The future depends on choosing the right leader. A king like Saul will lead to ruin. A king like David can lead to peace. In Jesus, God has given us the right King. A king who would live for us. A king who would die for us. A king who calls each of us to open our hearts to him. May we all choose to follow him. Our future depends on it.

Amen.