

Sermon: So you want to be successful?

I think we all want to be successful. In whatever we're doing, we want to do well. And we want our children and grandchildren to be successful too, don't we?

We want them to do well. We want them to be the best they can be. We want them to thrive.

And so it is with the activities and the clubs we're involved in. We want them to thrive and grow too.

Our church too; not just our congregation here, or even our denomination, but the whole one catholic and apostolic church. We want the church to grow, we want it to be secure. We want it to be a success.

It's okay to want success for ourselves. It's okay to want success for those we love. It's okay to want success for our church. These are all good things.

But there are two problems with wanting success, and we see them in this morning's old testament reading from the first book of Samuel.

Last week, we heard about the call of the prophet Samuel, when he was a young apprentice to Eli – and they were dark times for the people of Israel. We heard that “In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.” (1 Samuel 3:1b). The nation's enemies had won a great victory and the Ark of the Covenant had been captured by the Philistines. The Ark was central to Jewish worship, it contained the tablets of the ten commandments that God had given to Moses. It was important religiously, but it was also politically and culturally – it was a symbol of the nation's relationship with God (however weak that relationship had become). Interestingly though, Israel didn't charge into battle to get it back.

But things changed. Chapters 5 and 6 of 1 Samuel tell how God brought a plague of tumours on the Philistines, and how the Philistines sent it back, along with a guilt offering.

Twenty years passed, God brought a time of prosperity – of success – to Israel, with Samuel as Judge. And there was peace in the land.

Another twenty years passed, and Samuel was getting on, and he made his sons, Joel and Abijah judges over Israel, but we read that, just like Eli's sons before him, Samuel's sons didn't follow their father's ways, instead they took bribes and perverted justice. Things weren't looking so good for the nation of Israel.

The success of Israel was waning, and while Joel and Abijah might have been making the most of their positions for themselves, they weren't the successful leaders that Israel needed.

And so, as we heard in the reading, the elders – the leaders, the representatives of the people – came to Samuel at Ramah where there was a clash between Samuel the judge – who was called and appointed by God to lead the people, and the elders who were not appointed by God, but were leaders among the people.

With Samuel as judge, for twenty years, things had worked well. It had been a time of prosperity and peace. God's appointed leader, and God's chosen people had worked well together.

But as Samuel had stepped back, things had gone off the rails: His sons weren't being faithful, and the nation was suffering.

The elders looked at the other nations around them, and they saw – or at least they thought they saw – a solution to their problems, so they said to Samuel “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”

It made sense. Our neighbours are doing well, and they’ve got kings, so let’s have a king too.

What’s the problem? What’s wrong with having a king?

Well, the problem is that in wanting a king, Israel was taking God out of the picture. They wanted to be successful just like the other nations, rather than be successful, the way God wanted them to be.

Their desire for a king, came at the expense of their special relationship with God as his chosen people.

Samuel must have been feeling pretty bad. His sons had been unfaithful, and now all the people were being unfaithful too. So Samuel, faithful Samuel, prayed. He didn’t try and talk the people out of wanting a king. Instead, he took his concerns to God.

And God, in his compassion, comforted Samuel. They haven’t rejected you, he told Samuel, but they’ve rejected me. And God explains that it’s not the first time: “As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods...”.

God tells Samuel not to argue or debate with them. Instead, God tells Samuel to simply tell them the truth: “warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.” (8:9)

We have this wonderful speech from Samuel which runs from verse 11 to verse 17, which could really be titled “Good reasons not to have a king”.

Having a king, it turns out, is quite costly.

And Samuel details those costs to the people of Israel: he will take your sons, your daughters, your best land, a tenth of your harvest, a tenth of your livestock. And you’ll all have to do what he says.

Ouch.

Samuel says to the people: This is a bad idea. You’re going to be sorry. And it’ll all be your fault.

Samuel adds “... the Lord will not answer you in that day.” – Don’t expect God to bail you out once you realise you got it wrong.

It was a pretty convincing case against having a king.

But the people didn’t listen. They had their collective hearts set on having a king – they refused to listen “No. We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations...”

Peer pressure is an amazing thing: They wanted a king so they could be like their neighbours.

The people of Israel wanted to be successful like they thought their neighbours were.

And they were prepared to pay a high price for that success.

And that cost wasn't just their sons and daughters and land and livestock and all the rest of it, but it was them turning away from God. Rejecting God's kingship over them. Rejecting God who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and saved them time and time again.

But even in their rejection, God didn't turn away from them.

Even though they said, "No, no. We don't want to listen to you, God", God listened to them, and gave them what they wanted. They got a king.

In verse 22 The Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to their voice and set a king over them."

They got a king. They got the king they wanted.

The first king was Saul. And Saul was a successful king... until things went wrong. And then came David, the greatest king the earthly nation of Israel would see – but David was far from perfect. And then came Solomon – the richest and grandest of them all. And then there were some really bad ones. Jeroboam. Ahab. Omri. Rehoboam. Ahaz. And so on.

There were a few who did better, but mostly, things didn't work out.

But the people wanted a king. And there's a saying that history is made up of things that God makes happen, and of things that God lets happen. And I think the story of Israel's kings is one that God let happen... right up until the arrival of a baby in Bethlehem many, many years later, when Israel and the whole world, got the king they really needed.

So where does that leave us today? Do we want to be successful like Israel wanted to be successful? Before we say no, I think we need to think about it. I mean, I'm sure we're not about to ask God for a king... but there's a lot of success out there in the world, maybe we'd like some of that too.

So, do you want to be successful?

I said earlier that there are two problems with wanting success. The first one is having the wrong idea of success, and the Israelites had the wrong idea of success, because they saw their neighbours and took that to be success. Their idea of being successful was being like others, rather than being what God wanted them to be.

We need to ponder that, if Israel's idea of success was being like their neighbours was wrong, what should it have been?

There are many ways we could describe it, but it all boils down to this: Living as God's people. Living the way God wanted them to live. If they got that right, they would have been successful in God's eyes. They would have been loving God and loving each other. They would have been following God's commandments. They would have been praising and worshipping God.

And it's the same with us: What does our idea of being successful look like? For us as individuals? For us as a congregation? For us as a denomination?

Does the picture that we have of the success that we'd like come from God, or from the world. Once upon a time the success of the church was measured in how glorious the buildings were. But what they should have been doing was glorifying God. The buildings weren't wrong... but the focus was wrong.

And today parts of the church become preoccupied with serving the community, or on causes of social justice... again, nothing wrong with them. But our priority should be serving God.

And the second thing wrong with wanting success is the price you're prepared to pay for it.

There are some people that suggest the church has to change its message to suit the 21st century – we've seen parts of the broad church embracing worldly success, embracing the accumulation of wealth and prosperity. We've seen others turn away from the idea we are people that need saving, and think that we can solve all the world's problems if we just work harder.

The church may well need to change now and into the future – but we must not change the essential part of our faith and the message of love and hope that we share with the world. God is God. God is the God who sent his son Jesus to save a fallen, sinful world. God is the God who calls all to turn to him in faith.

It's always appealing to want to emulate other congregations or denominations or organisations that seem to be enjoying success... and to think that we should do the same thing. But it might not be what God wants from us.

So, you want to be successful?

The challenge for us, is not to look to others, but to look to God. What does God want us to do as a church? At one level it's pretty clear: God wants us to love him, to love each other, and to share the good news of Jesus. But as we get down to the detail, it gets more difficult.

And it's the same for us as individuals: God wants us to love him, to love each other, and to share the good news of Jesus. And again, the details are difficult. Should we all go as missionaries to Africa? Probably not. Should we all sell all we have and give it to the poor. Probably not. Should we all stand on street corners handing out bibles? Probably not. But none of those things are bad.

But whatever it is that we are going to do, we need to test it: Is it about loving God? Is it about loving each other? Is it about sharing the good news? If it isn't, then it's not what God wants us to do.

We need to remember that, even if we do get it wrong, even if we get it catastrophically wrong – like the ancient nation of Israel did time and time again – God isn't going to stop loving us. God has already given us the king we need. God will work through our mistakes and our failures, even though they may have consequences for us which may not be pleasant, just like he did for Israel.

It is daunting, and it is even scary, but God doesn't leave us on our own to figure things out. In all things we need to pay attention to God's direction. Ancient Israel had Samuel's prophetic advice – they just needed to listen. We have the scriptures, we have the wisdom of those who have gone before us, we have our sense of reason, and we have the Holy Spirit dwelling with us. And we just need to listen too.

So, you want to be successful? Listen to God, follow Jesus, and look for God's success.

Amen.