**Demand to be like others**  15/5/22 dkm

Read: Deuteronomy 17:14-20, 1Samuel 8

Text: 1Samuel 8

Psalms:111, 103:1-11, 118:8-14, 134a

In 2008 Barak Obama was elected president of the United States. Wikipedia tells us that, ‘He was the first African American president, the first multiracial president, and the first non-white president’. The non-white community rejoiced when Obama was elected. They hoped and believed that he would bring racial discrimination to an end. But what do we see today? Obama was challenged by a woman in the Primaries. Many women are still waiting for a female president to solve all their problems. The have a female African American vice-president, who will presumably solve the problems of women and non- white Americans one day!

We are being asked to elect political leaders in our country. Do we expect them to solve all our problems? Many do, as they cry out for more money, which they believe will solve all their problems. How duped many are as politicians go around promising money, money which they got from us in taxes! Others want laws changed so they can pursue their own life choices, and restrict the choices of others.

The nation of Israel was formed when the Lord brought them out of Egypt. Moses was their God-appointed leader: ‘The Lord spoke to Moses face to face as a man speaks to a friend’ (Exod 33:11), and Moses obeyed the voice of the Lord. The Lord established a covenant with the people of Israel, and ruled over his people through a person appointed by the Lord, in what we call a theocracy. Neither monarchy, rule by a king, or democracy, rule by the people, necessarily exclude theocracy, but the generally do. In this chapter we see the elders of Israel demanding a king. They had reasons for making this demand, legitimate reasons like Samuel’s rebellious sons, but was this their true motive for wanting a king? The Lord saw the people’s demand as rejection of his reign over them. When Samuel reminded them of the downsides of having a king, they refused to obey his voice.

**1. Rebellious sons**

‘Samuel was old’ we read as we come to chapter 8 of 1Samuel. This book began with the birth of Samuel. As a boy, the Lord spoke to him and he was established as a prophet in Israel. But the decline of the nation continued, until the Ark of the Covenant was captured, and Eli the priest and his two sons died. Samuel reappears and leads the people in a time of covenant renewal. His prayer on their behalf is answered when the Lord, through a thunderstorm, scattered the Philistines, and brought peace to Israel.

Samuel went on to judge Israel, but apparently failed to judge or discipline his own sons. It is amazing that, having seen and indeed prophesied against Eli and his wicked sons (3:13), amazing that Samuel should similarly fail to restrain his sons. Sadly, it is not unusual for ministers of the gospel to neglect their own family as they focus on the family of God. Even while counselling other parents about their children, some fail to see what is happening in their own family. Remember what Jesus said about seeing the speck in your brother’s eye and failing to see and consider the log in your own eye (Mat 7:3). One commentator writes of this chapter being a mirror that reveals ‘Israel and you’. The whole Bible is a mirror revealing our own hearts to us. We would be wise to examine our hearts, our motivations, and our conduct, in the light of God’s word, before others, and eventually the Lord, do this for us.

Samuel had two sons, Joel and Abijah, whom he made judges and posted in Beersheba (8:2). Previous judges were chosen and empowered by the Lord to deliver his people; ‘judgeship’ was not hereditary. It is interesting that after Gideon delivered them they wanted to make him king, but he refused saying, ‘The Lord shall rule over you’ (Judg 8:23). Samuel’s action in appointing his sons judges is not condemned in the text but their conduct certainly is. We, and he, might have thought that being posted in this southern border town would mean, ‘out of sight, out of mind’, but this was not the case.

The elders took note that Samuel’s sons did not walk in the ways of their father. They ‘turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes and perverted justice’ (8:3). While Eli’s sons were adulterous gluttons, Samuel’s sons lusted after riches, paying no regard to the means by which they accumulated their riches. The gods worshipped by Eli’s sons were their body and their belly, while the god worshipped by Samuel’s sons was money. One or both of their gods are still popular today, but I pray are not gods you worship! Bribery is condemned under the law because it blinds the eye to justice- just look at its effect in almost every society today (Deut 16:19). The elders of Israel were rightly concerned about the character and conduct of Samuel’s sons. But whole this gave them a pretext for asking for a king, it was not their only motivation.

**2. Rejection of Yahweh**

The elders of Israel came to Ramah to talk with Samuel. They reminded him that he was getting old and that his sons were corrupt (8:5). Samuel was not pleased to be told these truths. Their concern was who would lead Israel into the future, particularly when surrounding nations came against them; the Ammonites may have been threatening at this time (11:1). But there was another reason for asking for a king; they wanted a king so as to be ‘like all the nations’ (8:5). This king would not only ‘judge us’ but would ‘go out before us and fight our battles’ (8:20).

Samuel took their request for a king personally; what they asked ‘displeased’ him (8:6). In asking for a king, they were rejecting Samuel as their leader. Samuel had judged Israel from his youth, from the time the Lord made him a prophet. He was a good judge; remember the previous chapter in which he prayed as requested and the Lord delivered the people. That may have been years before, but we must not forget the blessings we have received from the Lord: ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits’ (Ps 103:2). Above all, let us not forget that, ‘while we were still sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8).

Samuel was hurt by the request of the elders but he did not turn upon them with harsh words. He turned to the Lord in prayer (8:6). How did the Lord answer Samuels’ prayer?

Firstly, the Lord told Samuel to give them what they wanted (8:7). It is interesting that Moses spoke of this very time, a time when the people would ask for a king in order to be like all the nations around them, and commanded, ‘You shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses’ (Deut 17:14-15). Moses further commanded what this king should and should not do. What he should do was read the Book of the Law, and obey God’s law, all the days of his life.

Rule by a human king, or monarchy, was not incompatible with divine rule, or theocracy. While ever the king acknowledged God as Lord and King, his throne would be blessed, but if he turned away from the Lord and began ruling in his own right, or ruling like kings of other nations, God’s blessing would be withdrawn.

Secondly, the Lord told Samuel that the people were not rejecting him as their leader but rejecting the Lord himself (8:7). They had been a rebellious people ever since the Lord saved them from slavery in Egypt. The people of Israel were rebels, just like Samuel’s sons, ‘who did not walk in the ways of their father’; so there was a measure of hypocrisy in their criticism of Samuel’s sons. The children of Israel did not like the Lord reigning over them. They wanted to have a king like other nations, a king they could see, a king with a real sword to lead them into battles. Ultimately, this king would be a man who would do their bidding, so they thought.

This call for a king was not unlike their desire to have idols. It was to be like other nations, to have a king and a god in their image whom they could control. Having an unseen, and in many ways unknown, God ruling over them was not acceptable to people who wanted to be in control of everything in their lives- nothing much has changed in human hearts since Samuel’s day has it? To have the Lord as their King required humility and faith. Do you find it easy to be humble and have faith? Do you not do everything possible to help yourself before calling on the Lord? Do you really believe the words you sing in Psalm 118:8: ‘It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man’? Do you believe Jesus when he says, ‘You cannot serve God and mammon’ (Mat 6:24). Do you accept the lordship of Christ in your life?

**3. Reminder**

‘Now therefore, heed their voice’ and give them a king (8:9); but warn them what life will be like under a king. The people of Russia and China do not need to be told these things. Not so long ago it was only kings of small African nations who were despots! Samuel told the people what the king they so desperately wanted would do to them, not for them. Kings are better at taking than they are at giving. Any human king will have a sinful, selfish heart, unlike the sinless and compassionate God.

When Moses spoke of Israel adopting a monarchy, he effectively warned them of this king accumulating horses, wives and riches for himself (Deut 17:16-17). Samuel gives a similar warning. The king they wanted to reign over them would take their sons to fight in his army, and to work in his field, and his factories. He would take their daughters to work as maids in his palace. He would also take their servants and donkeys to do his work. And the king would do what kings and governments do best, namely tax the people to support their lavish lifestyle. The king will take ‘a tenth of your grain’ and ‘a tenth of your sheep’. And if you do not pay, he will take the best of your fields and orchards. He might take them anyway if he wants them- remember Naboth and his vineyard.

The warnings Samuel gave were from the Lord. They were solemn warnings. The Lord knew they would end up crying to the Lord because the king they chose was oppressing them, but the Lord would not listen in that day (8:18).

It is not unusual for the Lord to give us what we want, after warning us that this thing will bring us heartbreak or disaster. Israel in the desert cried out for meat, which the Lord gave them and they got sick (Numb 11:23): ‘And He gave them their request, but sent leanness to their souls’ (Ps 106:15). I know a man who is in love with another man’s wife; clearly it is not God’s will for him to marry her but he will not listen. Christians fall in love with non-Christians, whom the Bible warns against marrying, but they go ahead anyway, often with disastrous results. Samuel listened to the people of Israel when they asked for a king, but will they listen to him now that he has warned them of the consequences of having ‘a king like all the nations’?

**4. Refusal to listen**

One commentator refers to these closing verses as ‘our immunity to wisdom’. The people were determined to have a king like other nations. If they heard what their aging prophet said they were not ready to change their ways. They knew what was best and they would have it: ‘No, but we will have a king over us’ (8:19). They had to be like everyone else. They had to focus on their own strength and their own weapons like everyone else. They were afraid to be different. So the Lord told Samuel to make them a king (8:22).

Are you immune to wisdom? Our society is, so if you are intent on being like other people you will be. The cry of the experts in our society is for education. If only children were better educated they would be better people. While education is important, remember what you get when you educate a thief- a smarter thief! Knowledge is necessary but it is not the same as wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps 111:10). Fear of the Lord comes from faith in the Lord, which is what the people of Israel lacked. What about you?