

Sermon on Saul and Jonathan Cashmere Presbyterian, 24 June 2018, Silvia Purdie
1 Samuel 18:1-14

How are you getting on with Samuel? I am asking you to read through all of 1 and 2 Samuel. Do you find it hard going? enjoyable?

Question: Have you sat down with Samuel yet? If so, how do you feel about it as you read?

I need to declare my agenda, show my hand. So this is it – here is why I want you to read the books of Samuel. Why? because I genuinely believe it is good for you to read the Bible. I go to ministers meetings and hear people bemoaning the low levels of biblical literacy among Christians these days, and I think, well, I will do all I can while I am your minister to encourage you to read the Bible and grow in your ability to make sense of it for yourself.

Why do I think it is good for you to read the Bible? Because I genuinely believe that it is the living Word of God. And when I say that I emphasise the living part, as the Bible to me is dynamic, interactive, not set in stone. I am fascinated by the ways that different parts of the Bible interact with other parts of the Bible, and you can't trace those conversations unless you actually read it, and not just your favourite bits. I am fascinated by the ways that these ancient stories can come alive for us.

I have a degree in Sociology, diplomas in Psychology and Counselling, and a major in Pastoral Theology. So of course I am biased toward the people in scripture, the relationships, the heart. Not to dismiss the ideas and convictions of theology and doctrine, but my primary lens is human experience, and my primary interest is God at work in people's lives.

Which gets us to the people in today's Bible reading: Saul, Jonathan and David.

And my reading of Saul has made me feel rather sorry for him, to be honest. The is the ultimate fallen hero, golden boy gone wrong. Great promise crumbling into mental illness and failure.

The Bible is tough on Saul. It reminds me of the adage that it is the winners of history who get to write history. The book of 1 Samuel is not written from Saul's point of view. The first half of the book is written from Samuel's point of view, and the 2nd half is written from David's point of view. In the middle there is a bit of a disjoint where the first half doesn't quite mesh with the 2nd half. Chapter 16 ends with King Saul employing young David as a musician in his court. But then at the end of Chapter 17 King Saul meets David for the first time after David kills Goliath. It's not important, but it does indicate that the person who compiled the stories into one scroll had two different stories that he put together and he didn't quite iron out the sequence of events.

From chapter 17 on the style of the story telling becomes very vivid. There are lots of details; it is dramatic narrative. I don't have any evidence for saying this, but I genuinely believe that from Chapter 17 onward we are hearing David's own voice as a story teller. As I read these chapters, to me it sounds like eye witness story telling. It's full of fascinating details that you couldn't invent – as they say, truth is stranger than fiction – like David's first wife Michal putting goat hair on a statue in David's bed as he snuck out the window, to make it look like he was sick in bed as a delaying tactic with Saul's guards.

All we know of David rings true with his ability to tell a good story; he could sing a good song and charm the pants off anyone (literally!). And we know that at that time they had the technology to record events in writing – papyrus & pens. They had developed their

own written script, a Hebrew version of the common writing used in that region 3000 years ago.

But, anyway, back to Saul. The fallen hero. Don't dismiss Saul too quickly. He ruled Israel for 4 decades. He won a lot of battles. He united the tribes. He tried to be faithful to God and to honour the prophet Samuel.

For half of his kingship he did a good job. But then a couple of decades in – I guess you could call it a midlife crisis. He lost his sense that God was with him, that God was on his side. Chapter 16 verse 14 puts it this way: "The Spirit of the Lord left Saul, and an evil spirit began to torment him". These days we would describe it in terms of mental illness, perhaps manic depression. Sometimes he could function OK, especially in battle. Other times he would be in deep blackness and anxiety. He felt constantly under threat, and he quickly turned violent even against his closest family.

And so Saul's is a sad story, tragic even. He began with such promise. He was tall and strong and handsome. He was eager to please God, and eager to please his people. Possibly too eager to please – that's part of why his leadership faltered. Desperate for approval, he was.

Can I ask you a question now, to discuss with the person next to you: Can you relate to this at all? Have you know people whose lives have become dominated by mental illness, or who have been so needy for the approval of others that they have failed to live up to their potential?

That's all I have time for on Saul. I'll give you a sheet on Saul next week and you can keep reading and thinking about it.

Now, though, on to Jonathan. Saul's eldest son, the rightful heir to Saul's kingdom. The relationship between Jonathan and David is a driving force through the rest of the book of 1 Samuel. Here's how the Bible describes their relationship:

Not long after meeting him, Jonathan came to love David more than his own life. He "liked him very much" (1 Sam 19:1)

Jonathan makes (and later renews) a covenant with David

As a sign of his love and devotion Jonathan gives David the symbols of his position as heir to the throne: his robe, shield and - highly valuable - weapons.

Jonathan relinquishes to David his rightful role, and dreams that David will one day be King with Jonathan as his right-hand man.

When Saul declares David to be traitor and threat, Jonathan continues to defend David to his father, to protect him from his father, and to secretly meet with him without his father's knowledge.

How would you describe their relationship? I don't know about you but when I read this, I can't help but jump to the conclusion that Jonathan was in love with David. The depth of love and self-sacrifice that Jonathan gave to David was astonishing. I am not suggesting that they had a sexual relationship; I am suggesting that these two men shared a bond of love that well beyond a normal friendship, and which Jonathan's father considered to be highly inappropriate.

We have been having some fascinating discussions here in Cashmere over the past few weeks about whether or not to bless same-gender couples here in this church. We are proceeding with this cautiously and respectfully. We come to this question seeking the mind of Christ, seeking to live as Biblical people in our world today. As your minister I

want to invite you to let the Bible surprise you. I believe that the Bible is not a fossilised rule book, but a Spirit-breathed authority that needs translating into every time and place.

Question: How do you respond to the suggestion that Jonathan may have been 'in love' with David?

So, there you are, Saul and Jonathan. Fascinating stories, intriguing human dynamics. A sermon short on theology, or application. I have not answered the 'so what?' question at all well. I wonder, what do we make of all this for ourselves? Where is God in all this? This is what we have to keep grappling with as we read the Old Testament. Where is the God we know in these ancient stories? We don't always recognise the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Yahweh of the Old Testament. We know that he is one and the same, but we don't always recognise him, especially when it comes to killing a hundred Philistines for a bride price of foreskins, or in God's rejection of King Saul. It does not seem fair to us. Old Testament battles do not fit with modern international codes of conduct between nations, and Old Testament sexual ethics do not automatically answer modern questions. Where is God in all this?

Mainly I just want to encourage you to think about it for yourself. This is not a right-answer, wrong-answer question.

But I do want to say, to finish this morning, that it is worth it. These ancient stories are worth sitting with, worth immersing yourself in, because the big ideas of our faith are formed here. Big ideas about obedience and love. Big ideas about covenant and leadership. We read about men and women responding to God as best they can, and we are formed in our own responding to God as best we can.