

Biblical Patterns For Public Theology

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SUMMARY

These Bible studies were delivered at the Biannual Conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians held at the Neues Leben Zentrum, Wölmersen,

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Germany, during 13–17 August, 2004. The theme of the conference was 'Evangelical Models for Public Theology', and the Bible readings take up different aspects of Christian responsibility in the life of the community.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese Bibelarbeiten wurden auf der zweijährlich stattfindenden Konferenz der FEET (Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians) im Neues Leben Zentrum,

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Wölmersen, vom 13. bis 17. August 2004 gehalten. Das Konferenzthema lautete "Evangelikale Modelle für öffentliche Theologie", und die Bibelauslegungen greifen verschiedene Aspekte der christlichen Verantwortung für das gemeinsame Leben auf.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les études bibliques qui suivent ont été apportées au colloque bisannuel de l'Association Européenne de Théologiens Évangéliques, au Neues Leben Zentrum, à

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Wölmersen, en Allemagne, en août 2004. Ce colloque avait pour thème général le sujet des modèles évangéliques pour l'éthique sociale et politique. Ces études bibliques abordent plusieurs aspects de la responsabilité du chrétien dans la vie sociale.

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1. LESSONS FROM SAMUEL

Reading: 1 Samuel 12

Everybody knows two familiar stories about the biblical character Samuel; there is the story of the young boy Samuel hearing the voice of God in the temple by night, and there is the later story of how he was sent with his horn of oil to anoint David as king over Israel. But apart from that he's probably a rather vague figure to many of us. Two books in the Bible, that were originally one, are named after him although he did not write them and in fact he dies well before the end of the first of them. It is clear that he was an extremely important figure in the history of the people, so it may be useful to look briefly at him and see what his significance for us might be in our present context of a conference on public theology.

Some time ago I was listening to a conversation on the radio in which various BBC overseas correspondents looked at the prospects for the new year that was just approaching. It was sadly impressive how they all gave the most pessimistic forecasts of what was likely to happen over the world generally with things getting worse and worse, and in many respects their forecasts have been all too accurate. In such a situation political affairs must inevitably claim our attention. I don't agree with those Christians who say that the business of the church is solely to prepare us for the next life and not to interfere with the history of our present world. If part of being a Christian is precisely to make us better human beings, then what happens in the world and how we behave in it is very much our concern.

Hence back to Samuel. His story is quite a long and complicated one, and I have to say that Old

Testament scholars have some difficulties in working out exactly what happened in detail, indeed whether it all happened just as it is told. But what we do have is a story that was skilfully put together to bring out some important points for the readers, and we have to look at it on that level.

We plunge into the midst of it in 1 Samuel 12 which is in effect a celebration of Samuel's retirement. He had filled the time after the last of the Judges as himself a judge, a prophet, a leader of the people, but he was now old enough to be succeeded by somebody else, and the people had made it clear that they did not want the succession to pass to his sons who were dishonest and untrustworthy. No, the people wanted to choose a king like other nations round about them. Here in this scene we have Samuel giving his farewell speech before he demits office. From it we can catch glimpses of four actors in the situation.

First, there is Samuel himself, *the retiring ruler*. He offers a defence of himself as a leader. He lists the things that he has not done. He has not used his position to take other people's property. He has not cheated anybody. He has not accepted bribes to induce him to give judgment in favour of one person rather than another. Now that is quite a remarkable record when you compare it with the reputations of some of our present or recent rulers, politicians both national and local, civil servants and local government officials, both in this country and elsewhere. It also stood out in Samuel's own world. A recent book by John Goldingay that covers this period in Bible history bears the title *Men behaving badly*, and there is an awful lot of bad behaviour in Samuel and Kings. Even rulers and leaders who had a fairly good reputation afterwards got them only when people conveniently forgot the other side of their characters; David and Solomon were not as saintly as later writers made them out to be. Maybe Samuel didn't always live up to his own ideals. We do get the impression in this chapter and elsewhere that he was more than a trifle peeved at being dropped by the people from office. But two things stand out. First, that he knew how rulers ought to behave, and second, that, unless he had successfully cheated the people, he had lived up to his ideals.

Second, Samuel talks about God himself, *the unseen ruler*. He gives the people a history lesson in which they see that God has been and continues to be active in their history. It was God who rescued them from Egypt in response to their cries for help. But when they forgot about God, they

found that God acted to discipline them and bring them back to himself. We cannot ignore the element of judgment in biblical history. Now I know that some people find this to be a difficult concept, but on a human level if you have a world in which there are wicked people who oppress other people, it is impossible to see how there can be any control over them and any establishment of justice without some kind of coercion and pain for the wicked. The biblical writers clearly believed that God acted in a way like human administrators of justice to make wicked people realise the folly of their ways and restrain them from further evil. So a large part of what we call judgment in the Old Testament is meant to be reformatory, to make people realise the error of their ways and encourage them to turn away from it.

That is what is being described here. For we read that when the people came to realise that they were being judged, they cried out to God to deliver them, and once again he heard their cries and relented. He gave them good leaders.

All this is meant to show that God acts through historical events to bring his people back to him when they have sinned and done wrong. We can thus have a positive view of the role of God here. His judgments are meant to be restorative for his people.

This leads us very smoothly to the third actor, or rather set of actors, in the story. These are *the people themselves*, the subjects ruled over by Samuel and then by Saul. They had asked Samuel to appoint a king for them. They were able to exercise some influence over how they were ruled, and their intervention brought the period of the judges to an end, and led to the transition to a monarchy. Later still, in 1 Kings we see how they took part in a rebellion against the monarchy that led to a split in the kingdom. On certain occasions, therefore, they had power and they wielded it.

But right here Samuel reminds them of the danger of wanting a human king. It seems that Samuel was uncertain whether the people's request for a king was an act of rebellion against God or not. God himself was their king, and a human king might be understood as a rival to God. Were the people rejecting God? But God was prepared to let them have their way, provided that their human king was subject to himself and followed his commandments. But nevertheless, it is clear that people, like their rulers, can act sinfully and make political errors. Somewhere in history somebody once said *Vox populi vox Dei*, meaning that the voice of the

people can be accepted as the voice of God when decisions have to be made. It is clearly false. The people themselves are fallible and sinful. The Men Behaving Badly are not just the rulers and leaders!

Fourthly, and finally, we return to Samuel again, but this time in a different role. At this point he retires from being the judge or leader of the people, but he doesn't retire completely, and it is worth spending a moment on *the retired leader*. In fact there is as much space devoted to him in 1 Samuel after his retirement as there is to the period before it; despite his admission that he was 'old and grey' he seems to have remained remarkably active. What happened? Basically, a person may retire from their particular office or task, but there is no retirement from being God's servant. So here we have a glimpse of what Samuel would continue to do after his retirement.

First, there would be no let up in his *teaching* and warning the people. I will teach you the way that is good and right, he says. There would continue to be advice from him that carried the authority of God. Even here he cannot restrain himself from warning the people against turning aside from God to idols. They are to serve the Lord with their whole hearts. Idols cannot do them any good, because they are powerless. They cannot rescue people from danger. Let them remember what God has done for them, and remain fully loyal to him.

Second, the people had asked Samuel to pray for them because they feared judgment. Maybe they were thinking simply of their present crisis. But Samuel goes beyond that, and declares that he will not fail to pray for them. He will go on doing this and not fall short in his concern for them. The Bible teaches clearly that God does respond to prayer by his people, and that God does things for some people because other people pray for them; a vast amount of prayer is what we call intercession, in which we ask on behalf of somebody else rather than on behalf of ourselves. The two things seem to go together, the obedience of the people to God and the prayers for them made by Samuel work together for their good.

The rest of the story illustrates this ongoing influence of Samuel throughout the difficult years of Saul's erratic rule and the rise to power of David.

What has the story to say to us in the contemporary world?

First, it illustrates *the character of the national leader*. It is interesting that time and again when rulers and leaders are being chosen, the biblical

writers ignore the question of their specific qualifications and competences for office and concentrate on their moral character. Not that the former doesn't matter, but it is crucial that they be honourable people who are not there to make what they can for themselves out of their position, to favour their friends and to oppress the poor. That is important for the choice of church leaders, as 1 Tim. 3 rightly notes, but it is also vital in politics. The moral qualities of leaders are a significant factor. I am not persuaded that we can bracket off the private lives of politicians and ignore them. Should we not be choosing our leaders not only in view of the party that they represent, but also and perhaps rather in view of their morality and their religion?

Second, we have seen *how God was active in the history* of his people. He is the unseen but very real actor in the story. But is this how he still works in the world today? This is a big question and study of it would exceed the time available and my capability. In fact, that's what the rest of the Conference is for. Can we see the hand of God in judgment in history today? One thing is clear: we cannot assume either that because a person or a people is doing well and prospering therefore God is pleased with them and is rewarding them, or that because a person or a people is suffering in some kind of way this is a divine judgment upon them for evil-doing. There is far too much innocent suffering in the world for us to be able to draw conclusions like that, and equally the biblical writers were very conscious that the wicked could prosper in a way that did not fit in with their wickedness. This makes it very difficult for us to identify specific cases of divine judgment and approval within history.

There is also the complicating factor that the New Testament makes us much more aware of the fact of a final judgment upon evil and its perpetrators. The biblical message is that there are eternal, cosmic standards of right and wrong, and that even if we escape human judgment we are still answerable to God for our lives. Human justice is so fallible and so likely to be swayed by human interest that we cannot rely on it. We need to be reminded of absolute, impartial standards and to be warned that we must all stand before the judgement seat of God to answer for what we have done in this life. How do we proclaim this effectively in today's world?

Third, there is *the responsibility of the people*. And here the important factor is that we are subjects not just of our human rulers but also of God. There-

fore, all of us are called to be obedient to God, and for that we need guidance and a clear understanding of God's purposes for society. We need to analyse the plans of politicians in the light of what we know of God's will. The obvious example of this is the measures taken to deal with terrorism and unjust rulers or with states threatening war on one another. How do we achieve justice and compassion? And this story reminds us that the people do have an influence on government. It is quite remarkable what even a comparatively small group of people can do by lobbying their representatives.

Fourth, there are the tasks from which we are never free, and these can be summed up as teaching other people the ways of the Lord and praying for them. The former is more obviously the task of people with the talent to do so, but it is important that in the New Testament the task of mutual instruction and encouragement is laid upon us all. The task of prayer is vital for all of us, as 1 Tim. 2 makes abundantly plain, and I shall return to it on a later occasion.

It follows from such a story as this that it is normal and natural for God's people to be engaged in government, and that government is a calling from God; we might want to discuss the relationship between the possibility of a pagan king like Cyrus being described as the Lord's anointed, although he was not consciously his servant, and the calling of a Christian to take part in government and being aware of it. What does this say to us about the nature of divine calling?

It is also the case that there is a responsibility for good government that rests upon people even when they are retired from leadership or perhaps have never held it; there is the responsibility to vote and lobby in the interests of truth, justice and compassion.

It is also extremely important to recognise that sin and failure can characterise even the best of leaders. Samuel's sons were not trustworthy, just like Eli's, although they presumably had a godly upbringing. And Saul, despite his initial promise fell far short; David was no saint. Biblical realism compels us to recognise the omnipresence of temptation, sin and failure, in ourselves as well as in others.

Therefore, we can never be free from the responsibility that Samuel continued to feel that he must not cease to teach people the way of the Lord. The principle of godly advisers for rulers runs through the Old Testament right on to the concept of the

two anointed leaders at Qumran, one the ruler and the other a priest. It is crucial that our rulers have godly, independent advisers, and that includes our local mayors and provosts and MPs as well as the leaders of central government.

So what we can see from this passage is that there are certain clear principles about the relationship of people to God which are sustained and carried further in the New Testament, and the Old Testament brings out more clearly the political responsibility and communal context in which we live our lives as Christians. In the national and world situation in which we find ourselves I claim that the story of Samuel can start us moving in the right direction.

2. Seek the Welfare of the City

Reading: Jeremiah 29:61-14

The theme of this important passage from the Old Testament is summed up in the command: *Seek the welfare of the city*, a phrase taken up by Bruce Winter as the title of his significant book on Christian duty in the modern world.

The situation requires little explanation. It is the period at the beginning of the exile. The judgment of God upon the people of Judah and their rulers has expressed itself in the capture and devastation of Jerusalem and the surrounding land, and the carrying off of a major proportion of the people to exile in the country of Babylon. The prophet was aware that this period of exile would be extremely long; suppose that at the end of the Second World War the inhabitants of some country defeated in it had been taken away from their land and settled somewhere else; the people of defeated Ruritania were taken into exile for seventy years in Toughistan in 1945. It is now the year 2004, and they are still there and not likely to be released before 2014. It is an appallingly long period of exile, and there were people in the time of Jeremiah who thought that a couple of years would be as long as it would last (Jer 28:1-4).

What do you say in such a situation? In this case, the best that one can say is: Accept the inevitable: settle down where God puts you and live as normal a life as is possible in the circumstances. It would seem that the people in exile were determined to continue to think of themselves as Jews and retain their identity. We may compare the sentiments expressed in Psalm 137 where the people are unable to forget their homeland and long to return. Nevertheless, they are told that they must

seek for the welfare of the place where they are settled. It is the city of their enemies, and all that they might want to see is its destruction and downfall, so that they can escape and be free. In fact that is exactly what they pray for in fearsome terms in Psalm 137 with its intense longing for revenge. But that is not going to happen. What they must do is seek the welfare of their new home, because their own welfare depends upon it.

This is surely a direction to the exiles to play a positive role in the place and society where they are settled. The precise way in which it would be worked out would depend on the specific circumstances.

The vast majority of us here on this occasion are people who live in our own countries, or in countries where we have voluntarily chosen to live and where we are welcome. It may, therefore, seem less applicable to us than to the original audience. But it seems to me that there is more than one application or extension that we should pick up.

1. There are a lot of people in the world today who have been moved from their own country to another, not because of divine judgment upon them personally but because they have been forced out of their previous home through oppressive governments, religious or racial persecution and the like. They are not captives but refugees.

Is it permissible for somebody in a receiving country to say to such people: you have come to our country, and we are glad to welcome you, but may we ask that when you come among us you will seek the welfare of this country which is now, for however long, your home? We ask you to live and work for the good of the society of which you are now a part. Is such a desire something that such people bring with them? Is it something that we should expect of them? If we are members of the government, is this a kind of condition that we should be expecting to be fulfilled or should even be imposing? You are very welcome if you are prepared to be loyal and cooperative members of this people.

2. There is, of course, alongside this another extrapolation: it is obviously that we in the receiving country should be a *welcoming country* and that we should also be seeking the welfare of those who come into our country. For we are hardly in a position to say to the incomers: Seek the welfare of your new country, unless we are prepared first of all to seek their welfare. But can Christian love mean anything less? Clearly, we cannot make demands on the incomers if we are not first prepared to wel-

come them and seek for their welfare.

I believe that we probably have to take up this inversion of the situation envisaged by Jeremiah and consider what it means for us to live with people who are immigrants into our own country. Our understanding of divine grace as a pattern that we are surely to follow in our lives surely implies nothing less.

3. But, of course, there is manifestly a third extension of the text, which is that we don't need to be exiles in a foreign land to hear these words addressed to us. They apply to us just as strongly if we are living in what we may call *our own land*, and they call us to seek the welfare of our fellow-citizens. Here the principle of any people working for the good of the place where they live and the people who surround them is clearly envisaged.

4. And all this must surely be put in the wider context, that we seek the good of *Europe as a whole* and indeed of *the world as a whole*. The boundaries between countries and groups of countries are arbitrary.

5. Still more widely we may apply the principle to *where-ever* we are. On the one hand, the Jews were being told to act in this way because it was God who had placed them in Babylon; they were under his judgment, and he had sent them into exile (v. 7), and therefore they were to accept their situation as being under his will. The New Testament equivalent of this is doubtless Romans 8:28, which is that God can work in every situation for our ultimate good, and therefore we are to accept what happens to us as a situation with positive potential. On the other hand, there was in this case also a temporal limit set to this situation. There was a divine promise to take the people of Israel back to their own land, and God promised to provide for their welfare. This might seem to suggest that even if a situation is temporary, we should nevertheless make fruitful use of it, and not conclude that it is not worth doing anything because it is short-lived. Sometime Christian believers who know that we are in this world for a short time compared with the everlasting ages of eternity in the world to come somehow assume that this frees us of responsibility to work for the welfare of this world. How far should we see this world as a Vanity Fair through which we must seek to go as quickly as possible to reach the Delectable Country on the other side and to avoid being side-tracked and seduced, and how far are we to recognise that God has some positive purpose in the various stages of pilgrimage through which we have to pass?

There is a further point of a different kind that arises when we consider the audience to whom these words are addressed, and it raises questions that there is simply not time here to discuss fully. Here, as elsewhere in these studies, we are facing the question whether we can take the behavioural teaching of Jesus and of the biblical writers which was so frequently given to individuals and concerned with their personal, private conduct and ask whether we are required to apply it to them in regard to what they do as members of society and further we must ask whether it applies to what societies do to individuals and to one another. What does it mean for Greece in relationship to Turkey? What does it mean for one multi-national company in relation to another and also in relation to the countries in which it works? And what does it mean for the army of one country in relation to the army of another country in the time of war?

I believe that there is sufficient justification in the Bible for making this kind of public application. There is much more in the Old Testament than in the New Testament in this respect. And therefore, unless we are theological Marcionites we shall pay proper attention to it. Paul gives instructions to people in households regarding their relationships. He wrote to people in their roles and functions and gave them exhortation on how they were to behave precisely in these situations. Instructions are given regarding the people's attitudes to rulers and a little, admittedly not very much, is said about the duties of the latter. There is judgment in Revelation on godless societies. Jesus attacked the scribes and Pharisees as a body and their corporate attitudes, and he had words to say to Pilate as governor. John the Baptist told three groups of workers how to behave in their work. Jesus spoke about divorce law, about the tithing laws, about the sabbath law. The more difficult question is whether we can take the teaching that appears to be directed more to individuals as individuals and apply it to societies, governments and organisations. And among such organisations there is also the Christian congregation to which we belong in the town where we live and its relationship to the people who live or work further down the same street. How does it apply to us?

One way ahead is to consider the various alternatives to what we are told here. These include:

1. *Doing nothing*. I assume that I am an island and can live without any attention to the people around. There can be a ghetto mentality in which we put barriers between ourselves and the local

people, and we see it happening in the world around us, in places where people are not being integrated into society. Is that how we ourselves behave as a congregation? We may say that our church building is open to all who want to come in, but in practice we do nothing to welcome and encourage people in.

2. *Seeking my own advantage* at the cost of other people. This is pure selfishness. But it might be worth asking what kinds of actions would fall into this category. Somewhat less reprehensible is

3. *Seeking the good of my own group* and not that of the community as a whole. Our concern is for fellow-Ruritarians living in Toughistan and not for the Toughans or anybody else. I suspect that sometimes people are really following line 2 when they profess to be following line 3. The difference between this and the first line is that here we may be actively pursuing our own interests to the disadvantage of other people. One argument against going to war with Iraq was that, however wicked Saddam Hussein might be to many of his own people, such as the Kurds, he was probably more tolerant of Christianity than would be the case if he were expelled and replaced by an Islamic government bent on imposing its own laws on everybody. Was such an argument justifiable?

4. Going further in a negative direction, we might even *seek the evil* of the Toughans because they in this scenario are the conquering nation. But if we think in terms of evangelism, it is surely obvious that we have an obligation to take the gospel to all people and not just to our friends, and it is difficult to take the gospel to people while trying to take advantage of them at the same time.

5. Over against these possibilities is positively *seeking the welfare* of the community to which we belong.

Now this could be done from the selfish desire to promote the prosperity of their new home insofar as this will be a means of increasing their own prosperity? Admittedly Jeremiah spoke to the Jewish captives in this way: your welfare depends on the welfare of Babylon, so seek the welfare of Babylon. So good may be done from mixed or imperfect motives. But in the harsh world of political reality it may be that we cannot avoid this element of self-interest and turn it to the advantage of the society. Clearly it is better if there is a genuine concern for the people around about us for their good as well as our own.

Recently my own congregation did a major refurbishment of its building to make it more

attractive and comfortable and flexible for contemporary needs. It hasn't thought out very clearly just what it is going to do with it, but maybe you can only concentrate on one thing at a time. We never thought of looking for financial help from the National Lottery, but we did discover that you can get some refund of tax from companies engaged in landfill projects, and so we applied and got a useful grant. At this point you discover that there are strings attached, and the question was what contribution will your rebuilding make to community development: devise and show us your community development plan, how the church building and the congregation can contribute to the life of the community round about us. Maybe having to do this is going to make us aware that there is a community round about us, even if virtually nobody who attends the church lives within half a mile or more of it. But my point is that here as a Christian group we are being made to ask what we can contribute to the life of the community; and as a long-time opponent of what we used to call the social gospel – that liberal diversion from the real business of evangelism – I have come to see that we can and must use every channel to demonstrate the love and justice of God and for its own sake, as well as because it establishes a point of contact for evangelism, we must seek the welfare of the community round about us. I realise that we can be so busy with the affairs of the church (and I am guilty as anybody else) that we have no time for communal involvement. And that is a practical problem to which I don't have the answer.

The picture presented here in Jeremiah is one of an integrated society in the sense that its members work together for their mutual welfare. In our pluralistic world, it must be seen as consistent with the desire to retain elements of one's own culture and especially our religion, while recognising the rights of everybody else to the same freedom.

The principle is clear enough. The execution of it is a different matter. What happens when the religions lead to a clash in the way that people live together? What do we do when a religion or way of life for instance upholds the legitimacy and desirability of homosexual and similar relationships and the upbringing of children by partners of the same sex when our belief is that the traditional heterosexual marriage is the appropriate way to bring up children; or when Islamic groups insist that the country as a whole should be governed under Moslem law because in Islam religion and the state are inseparable? What do I want my children to be

taught in school, and what rights have I to expect a Christian or a Muslim or a humanist education? What do I do if I am living in Uganda in fear of my family being carried away by the Lord's Resistance Army? These questions arise and cannot be avoided. Yet they cannot be regarded as making Jeremiah's principle false or unacceptable.

Nor can I see that they make us reject the principle that we work together as fellow-Jews or fellow-Christians or fellow-Muslims for the benefit of society as a whole and that we seek to integrate so far as we can and do what is for the good of the people and the land as a whole.

If we want a New Testament passage to link with this one, we may find it in 1 Peter. The great contribution of L. Goppelt to the interpretation of that letter is that he shows how Peter expects his readers to interact positively with the world, even if it is a hostile world. There is no retreat from it. Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge (1 Pet 2:12). Wives are to live in such a way that non-believing husbands may be won over. Keep your conscience clear, so that those who malign you for your good conduct in Christ be put to shame. Do not commit crimes that bring the name of Christ into disrepute. But this attitude is not peculiar to 1 Peter. But alongside this, there is full recognition of the reality of suffering in the world. This side emerges more prominently in Revelation, which has much to say about how one holds on to faith in a situation of intense suffering, and Goppelt rightly recognises that somehow both responses to the sinful world must be held together. Somehow despite every disincentive we must seek the welfare of the city, the village, the country and recognise that this maybe for our own good but must be practised because every city and village and country matters to our God.

3. Prayer for Everybody

Reading: 1 Timothy 2:1-10

The letter that we know as First Timothy was written to a man who was the overseer of a number of churches which were going through a time of trouble and difficulty. The churches had been founded by Paul, but there were at least two things going wrong in them.

One of them was a group of people in them who were putting forward teaching that was different

from Paul's. They liked to burrow in the Old Testament and they discovered many things there about which they could speculate and argue to their heart's content. Some of them came to the conclusion that some foods were unclean for Christians to eat and some of them said that marriage was wrong as well. The church was in danger of being split by these views which aroused a lot of controversy and discussion, and the controversy threatened to become the main activity of the church members. (I suspect that it involved some of the women who were teaching in the church and that this explains why Paul had to instruct them not to teach at all.)

The other thing that was causing trouble was that some of the people were very well-off. You could see this in the way in which the wives dressed to come to church; they had expensive hair-dos and they wore costly jewelry; they flaunted their wealth by the way in which they decked themselves out and tried to make themselves look attractive. So this letter was written to help the church leaders to deal with the situation. Chapter 1 is the preliminaries, putting Timothy wise to the situation and reminding him of the central facts of the Gospel. Chapter 2 gets down to the main agenda of what needs to be done. We are going to look at only one of the elements in Paul's solution to the problem. I find it very significant that the first thing that Timothy is told is to see that the congregation engages in prayer.

There is no doubt that the first and perhaps the major casualty in a church that is divided or engaged in controversy is congregational prayer. Debate and argument are so much more interesting and exciting. And people who are arguing are generally not in the mood for prayer. If a husband and wife are quarrelling with one another, it is unlikely that they will be able to conclude the day by praying together, although to do so would be the practical means of bringing their rift to an end. But the church does not need to be quarrelling for prayer to get quietly put aside. If we are even moderately well-off, so that we don't need to worry too much about where the next meal is coming from, then we can easily feel self-confident and don't need to pray to the Lord; if our daily bread is assured, why bother to pray, Give us today our daily bread? We all of us find other things that drive prayer into a corner of our lives if they don't drive it out altogether. It is very easy to become too busy to pray, and if we try to avoid the challenge by saying that of course we are really praying all the time, then very often this is a way of avoiding prayer.

In a college chapel in Cambridge which I used to attend there was a text carved on the wall which said, 'In the handiwork of their craft is their prayer', meaning that the workman could regard his handiwork as being equivalent to a prayer, an offering to God. The text was not from the Bible as we know it, but from the Apocrypha, and I venture to suggest that it is not true. If we don't have specific times or occasions for proper prayer, then we shall be in grave danger of not really praying.

Some people tell us that they can worship God by walking in the hills and seeing his handiwork in creation rather than by coming to church; I strongly suspect that it is easy to slip into enjoying the hills for their own sake with only a sideglance at the creator and I'm not sure where Jesus or the Holy Spirit fit into that alleged kind of worship. Praise God for the beauty of the world by all means, but you also need to be with the fellowship of his other people in the congregation and offering praise to him through Jesus Christ in the Spirit.

So prayer can be the first casualty of a Christian life or a congregational life that is slipping away from what really matters. But there is another way in which it is at the top of Paul's agenda. When he says 'first of all', he doesn't just mean that this is the first item for discussion; he means that it is first in importance. This is the primary thing that Christians need to be doing. It is not necessarily the first thing in order of action. For example, if you are confronted by a situation of human need in which, say, you have some people starving to death, then your first duty is surely to provide food for them and care for them rather than to pray about them. You should go and help them rather than go to your church service. But Paul is here talking not about emergencies, but about what should be normal in the meeting of the congregation, and he is saying that at the top of our priorities for what we do in church stands prayer. There are other important things to do as well, and in this same letter it is clear that teaching about Christian belief and practice is of fundamental importance. But as regards what we do when we have listened to the teaching, the priority is prayer. You may do all the other right things in church, but if prayer is lacking, then something has gone drastically wrong.

The Importance of Prayer

Why is prayer so important? What is the reason for it? Paul develops two related reasons here in this passage. He starts by saying that we should pray for everybody, and then he particularises and

speaks about kings and those in authority.

The first thing that they are to do is to pray for everybody, that is to say for any and all people, because God wants people to come to know the truth and to be saved.

Paul frequently encourages his readers to pray for the mission on which he is engaged with his colleagues. The prayer is for the missionaries and that the Word of God may run and prosper. In Paul and the New Testament generally there is not a lot of reference to prayer for the people to whom the gospel is directed, but this passage is clearly one such, and it receives powerful backing from Romans 10:1 with Paul's prayer for his fellow-Jews that they may be saved. If the church is supposed to be active in witness and evangelism, as we know that it is, then it must also be active in prayer for the world and for its ultimate welfare both spiritual and material.

Second, there is the prayer for *rulers*. We have seen how the theme is already there in the OT, with the specific example of Samuel who promises to pray for the people when he is retired from his office as their leader (a judge) and Saul takes his place. Likewise the Jews prayed for rulers, although they refused to worship them. There is a very clear distinction between praying to rulers and worshipping them and praying to God for them. The difficulty is when the ruler demands the former and is not content with the latter. But this does not invalidate the basic principle which is that we are called to pray for rulers.

The practical necessity for this is painfully obvious. During the past few years there has been more than one dreadful story about people who have visited other countries where they have been captured by lawless people and held as hostages; in some cases the story has ended happily, but in others there has been grim tragedy as the hostages have been killed and maltreated. These things have happened primarily because the governments of the countries in question have been unable to deal with the activities of these lawless groups for a variety of reasons into which we need not enter, but sometimes including the fact that some of these governments may not have treated their peoples justly and they have rebelled as their only way of getting redress for their wrongs. The result is that ordinary people are unable to live in security and peace.

One particular aspect of this problem may be when Christian people or people of other religions are discriminated against or actively attacked primarily because of their religion, and we know that

this happens in many countries. But in the UK we also know that our government has treated some groups in the community, like Irish Roman Catholics, as second-class citizens.

Therefore in this passage Christians are told to pray for rulers and governments so that they may live peaceful and quiet lives in the practice of their religion. They are to pray that governments may rule with justice, so that people are treated fairly and their rights are respected, that they may have authority to ensure that lawlessness is overcome, that they may have wisdom to find workable solutions to their problems, and that they may have compassion for those who are needy. But above all the stress here is on the need to provide freedom and security for people as they live their daily lives.

The prayer for rulers is not specifically for the rulers themselves to be converted, although it is an unavoidable inference from the rest of the passage that they are included in this kind of prayer. Rather the prayer is for a situation in which believers may live a peaceable life in which they can practise godliness and dignity, i.e. a Christian life in every aspect as it is understood in this letter. In the context it is reasonable to assume that this means conditions in which the Christian witness may go ahead.

This command to the church is based on the known fact of God's grace and love. He gave his Son Jesus Christ to be a mediator between himself and the sinful world, to bring about a reconciliation between God and human beings, to deliver people from their sins. That is what the gospel is about, and the church has a gospel simply and only because it has a God who is a Saviour and longs to deliver people from the mess into which they have gotten themselves. This, then, is a prayer that people should come to hear the Christian message and be given the opportunity to respond to it.

The specific point made here is that God's desire is for all people to be able to come to know the truth and so to be saved. The particular slant here may be that Gentiles are the object of God's mercy alongside Jews, particularly if there were groups in the Church with restrictive policies regarding the scope of evangelism, but in any case it suggests that the gospel is intended to go to all people in all places. It is based on the fact that God has provided only one Mediator, and therefore the way of salvation must be the same for all people. It is crucially important that Jesus is the only Saviour for Jews as well as for Gentiles.

So there is a twofold basis for the command that

we have here. God wants all people to be saved and he wants them to be able to live godly lives. Therefore it is right and proper to pray both for people to be saved and for them to have the political and social conditions in which they can live the Christian life. Pray for everybody that they may be saved. Pray for rulers and governments and all in authority that they may establish a society in which people can live quiet and peaceful lives. Pray for salvation and peace.

But why is Prayer needed?

We can appreciate the need for these two things to happen, salvation and peace. We can also see that Christians are called to work to bring them about in a whole variety of ways. But then what has prayer got to do with it? Why isn't it enough to get on with the jobs of preaching the gospel and working positively in the community? Why do we need to pray in addition? And why is prayer put at the head of the church's agenda?

First of all, there is the pragmatic answer that *prayer is effective*. When the different ways in which people can pray are listed here in this passage, the list includes requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving. Prayer isn't just asking for things to happen for ourselves and other people; it is also giving thanks for what we receive. It is expressing gratitude for requests that have been answered. There is a danger that we think of the typical 'long prayer' in church as nothing more than a shopping list in which we ask God for this, that and the other. Maybe we should turn it into a thank-you list in which we remember how our prayers have been answered. People who pray find that things happen because of their prayers. So our times of thanksgiving give us the evidence that prayers of petition and intercession are effective.

Second, *prayer releases spiritual powers* in the world. There are things that happen that we do not expect or that we cannot account for, things that take us by surprise even when we have been praying about them. There seems to be no accountable reason for some of the things that happen. That is because we think of things purely in human terms. But does not God have the power to act in the lives of people and to change them and make them behave in ways of his choice? We pray for people to be healed, and people may be healed in ways that include but also that lie beyond the capabilities of medical practice, and the word 'miracle' is not unknown even among people who are not particularly religious. Can we believe that God can do

similar things in politics and social concerns?

Third, *prayer is the natural expression of our faith*. Prayer is like most of the words that we use in talking about God. We take ordinary human relationships and qualities and actions and we use them to talk about God, recognising that they are inadequate and that they are at best pictures for what lies beyond words. So we talk about God as a Father, or even sometimes as being like a mother, using the best we know about human parents and children to explain in an intelligible way how we are related to God. Or we take the idea of forgiveness and understand how God acts towards people who have disobeyed his commands and treats them with love and pardon.

Now prayer is like the human activity of asking somebody for something and expressing thanks for it. It's not the sort of relationship you have with the shopkeeper or business executive, but it arises when you are dealing with persons as persons, as in family relationships. The parents ask the child, 'What do you want for Christmas?' and the child responds with a request. The request may be one that can be met without difficulty, or it may be something that cannot be done, or it may be a request that is inappropriate and therefore shouldn't be answered straightforwardly. But the request is made within a context of love, and the asking and the giving and the thanking are all part of that relationship and help to strengthen the bond between the giver and the recipient. Of course, that is the ideal; the reality may be different, and we may have to entreat the garage mechanic to have the car serviced by tomorrow, or the school teacher not to treat us as we deserve for our stupidity, and the person whom we ask may be ruled by conflicting motives. But we can see what the ideal is. And we ask our family and loved ones and friends even though they may already know what we want, and even though we know that they may not be able to supply what we need, and even though they may know better than we do what is good for us.

Can we take that picture and apply it to ourselves and God? It is then telling us that we can go to God with our requests, because he is gracious and loving and responds to prayer. It also suggests that one reason why we don't always get what we need is because we don't ask. Certainly, this is the way in which Jesus understood prayer, as the expression of our relationship to God as his children. And what is happening in this passage is that we are given a tremendous assurance that God wants to save all people everywhere, and therefore we are making a

request that is fully in line with what we know of his love and grace.

Two Unanswerable Questions

There are two questions that I cannot answer. The first is *why God needs us to pray* in order for his wish for the world to be fulfilled. If God wants to save people, why doesn't he get on with it without being dependent on our prayers? The other question is how it is that we can pray to God for governments to behave justly and *yet they don't*, and how it is that we can pray to God for people to be saved, and yet they don't respond to the gospel.

I don't know the answer to these questions, and I think that all I can say in response to them is that here our relationship to God is one of faith and trust where we cannot understand. His ways are beyond our understanding and we are called to trust in him. That after all is part of what faith is. It is the willingness to believe that God is good and kind despite the things that go wrong in the world, because we believe that Jesus, dying on the cross and rising from the dead, is the evidence of the love and the power of God. This is hopeful prayer that is going to be answered positively by God.

If we dare to believe like that, then we can also dare to pray and we must pray. And so this direction to make congregational prayer a priority comes as a powerful challenge to us. Prayer must be central in all our efforts to grow and mature as a Christian congregation. May God enable us to overcome the temptations not to pray and fill us with the desire to be a people who delight to speak to him in prayer.

4. Prophetic Action

Reading: 2 Chronicles 28:1-15

The background to our reading is doubtless familiar to all of us. The land that we tend to call Palestine or Israel was conquered by the Jewish people, all twelve tribes of them after the invasion led by Joshua; the invaders eventually became one nation and were ruled by three kings in succession, first Saul, then David and finally Solomon. After Solomon there was an independence movement directed against his successor who was called Rehoboam, and the larger part of the country in the north seceded and appointed its own king called Jeroboam. The loyal, southern part around Jerusalem, became known as Judah, because it consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin; the rebellious north-

ern part, consisting of the remaining tribes, became known as Israel or Samaria, and that is why we have these two alternative names for the country. The people are the Jews, the land is Israel. On the whole, the southern part was more loyal to their ancestral God, and the northern part was more inclined to follow foreign gods and break the commandments of the true God. But neither part of the country could be said to be free from guilt.

They had a tumultuous history, often attacked by their neighbours and other foreign powers, and they also fought one another. The writers of the history in the Bible saw the hand of God in what happened to them. They believed that when the Israelites or the Judaeans suffered at the hands of their enemies this was a judgment upon them by God, a punishment for their sins and a warning to them to turn back to God lest things became even worse.

So the story in this chapter tells how the little southern kingdom under a new king called Ahaz turned away from God and followed idols and even practised human sacrifice. As a result God let them suffer at the hands of their enemies. These included the king of Aram who inflicted a heavy defeat on them, and also the king of the northern kingdom of Israel, Pekah, who also fought against them and overcame them. A huge number of people were killed in battle, and to make matters worse an enormous number of prisoners were taken, mostly it would seem the families of the men who were slain in the army, their wives, sons and daughters. The fate of prisoners of war in the ancient world was typically to be made into slaves of the conqueror, cheap labour. Along with the prisoners the northern army carried off all the valuable things that they could find that had belonged to their enemies. It was a devastating blow against a small kingdom.

So far the story is like many other stories of war in the ancient world, and what happened was typical of many such incidents. But then the story takes a surprising turn. Although the northern kingdom was often idolatrous and rebellious against God, he still spoke to it through his prophets, and now a man called Oded went out to meet the army when it came back with the captives. He had stern words to say to them. He commented on how they had killed the men in the army and taken captives and plunder, and he said to them, In the name of God I command you to send the prisoners back home and set them free. Imagine, if you can, a religious leader in America going to the White House or one in the UK going to Downing Street and saying to the

President or Prime Minister: set Saddam Hussein free, and imagine if you can, the leader of the country agreeing to do so. It doesn't sound very likely, but that is what happened in this story. The leaders in the northern kingdom said to the victorious army coming back from the war: You can't bring those prisoners here; take them back to where they belong. And the army did so. They took the captive men and women and the property and they sent them back to Judah. Well, they actually did more than that. Some of them had lost any decent clothing they had, so they gave them fresh clothing out of the plunder. They were starving, because of the forced march northwards as prisoners, so they gave them some food and drink. There were those who had been injured in the fighting, and there were older people who were utterly exhausted by their experiences. So they provided healing balm and medicine for them, and they put those who were weak on donkeys and brought them safely back to Jericho which was on the border, and then they returned home.

So far the story. It was a grim world in which they lived, but not, I fancy, any grimmer than the world in which we live with its appalling cruelty in warfare and terrorism. Let me draw out the key points that arise in it.

First, we see here the fact that religious people were prepared to stand up in the name of God and *confront* the politicians and the generals. They condemned the wrong things that they were doing and they commanded them to do what was right. I could have chosen any one of a number of Old Testament incidents that would have illustrated the same point. Oded was just one example of a long line of prophets who heard the call of God to stand up for what was right, people like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Amos and Micah, and many others, who spoke out as God's ambassadors.

Sometimes they risked their lives to do so, time and again their words fell on deaf ears, and some of them paid for their courage with their lives. But in this particular story and there are others also, the remarkable thing is that *their words had some effect*. Nothing could undo the death of the men in the Judean army, but it was possible to stop the action going any further. The very first point in this story is that action by religious people can influence the politicians and even the generals to act differently, and we should not underestimate what can be done.

How did they achieve their effect? Oded used vari-

ous arguments in his appeal to his audience.

The first was this: when a people go to war, it is very easy for them to be *carried away by it and not know when to stop*. You have slaughtered your enemies in a rage that reaches to heaven, he said. Having inflicted a defeat on the enemy, the victorious side did not know when to stop and proceeded to maltreat the defeated. We have seen this happen in our own day, in the stories that appear to be reliable about serious abuse of Iraqis by some of the alliance soldiers, even if not all the stories are true. It is part of evil human nature. Oded recognised this, and he acted to call a halt to a massacre and cruelty that went far beyond what was reasonable.

Next, Oded told his audience that God had allowed the Judeans to be defeated as a punishment for their sin and evil. But the Israelites themselves were also guilty of sin against God, and indeed they were generally worse than the Judeans. There was the implied threat that bad things could happen to them also if they aroused *the wrath of God* by the way in which they behaved. God would judge them also.

Third, what was their sin? It would seem that there were two related things. On the one hand, even though there had been a split in the kingdom of David and Solomon so that there were now two independent kingdoms, nevertheless the people in the south were fellow-Israelites with the people in the north. So what was happening here was *brother fighting against brother, sisters suffering at the hands of sisters*. In the understanding of the time, it may have been all right to attack foreign peoples, but to do so to your own kith and kin was inexcusable, and so Oded turned on them and castigated them. We would need to ask whether we can draw the lines at this point. The teaching of Jesus extends love to enemies as well as to neighbours. On the other hand, the enslavement of the civilians and the plunder of their property was *inhumanity*, although it was common enough in ancient war. We have here the beginnings of the recognition that there are limits to what is acceptable in war. Clearly this applies particularly if we are forced into war by aggression from outside, and must defend ourselves in ways that are acceptable, at least relatively speaking.

The fourth thing I would have us note from the story is that when the Israelites took this to heart, they proceeded to make up for their inhumanity by showing compassion to the prisoners. They didn't simply set them free and let them find their own way back home; they cared for them in their great

need and provided for their wants. We have here a story of *remarkable compassion*, perhaps beyond what we would expect. It is a story with what we might call a happy ending, although it could never be completely happy after the many deaths that had taken place in the war.

And so now I ask what it has to say to us.

This story is concerned with how people are to behave in their dealings with one another. We sometimes think that the Christian religion is entirely concerned with what we believe, and we devote a lot of our time in church to learning about what we are to believe. But this story is about how we are to live, our relationships with other people, the treatment of our enemies.

A lot of the teaching given by Jesus was about precisely this. He was telling people how they are to live in the family of God or in the kingdom of God. And what he had to tell them was very much the same as what the prophets said in the Old Testament. I omitted to tell you earlier, but maybe you picked up the point for yourself, that the capital city of the northern kingdom was a place called Samaria, and the very last word in the story was about the army going back from Jericho to Samaria. These were the people who were the ancestors of the Samaritans in the time of Jesus. When Jesus was asked by a Jewish teacher how people were to live, Jesus told a story about a man who was attacked by terrorists on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and was helped, not by fellow-Jews, but by a man from Samaria who healed his wounds, put him on his donkey, and took him to the comparative comfort of an inn in Jericho. The echoes in Jesus' parable of this story are just too strong to be accidental. Jesus knew this story and told his own story that makes much the same point.

The story told by Jesus was one about personal conduct, how the lawyer who spoke with Jesus was to treat other people. Much of the teaching of Jesus is given in this kind of way. And we might be tempted to draw two conclusions. First, that the teaching of Jesus and his followers was given to individuals and is concerned with their own personal lives. In this particular case, it is the question of how you treat the people we call neighbours. And, second, that the audiences addressed by Jesus and his followers were people in their personal lives.

But behind the story told by Jesus we have this action by Oded in which he takes on the leaders of the army in the matter of how they are behaving as leaders of the army. He is concerned with public

morality, not just with how we related to society as private individuals, but how we behave as members of society in the different roles and occupations and positions that we have. The special circumstances of the mission of Jesus are not an excuse for us to think that the gospel has nothing to do with public life or that as Christians we are not called to address people in their official positions in government and business.

So what are the practical things that Christian followers of Jesus must do? Starting from there it is very clear that they are justice and compassion.

First, *justice*. It is unfortunate that wars have to be fought, often by people who are forced to do so because of enemy invaders and terrorists. Such wars must be fought in as just a manner as possible. War is an evil, but there can be rules that make it less so. There are principles like not attacking non-combatants, not destroying things for the sake of destruction, not inflicting wounds that go beyond what is just, respecting the limits of an eye for an eye and not seeking monstrous revenge. There is a long Christian tradition of what is called just war theory, that lays down guidelines for whether one should go to war, and if one does, how that war should be conducted. I am aware that the concept has been criticised, and not only by pacifists, but I would still claim that some vital points remain valid.

The second element is *compassion*; this is the added factor that we bring into our dealings even with enemies. The teaching of Jesus has taken us beyond thinking of some people as our brothers and sisters and others as our enemies, for Jesus and his followers have shown us that all of humanity are people for whom Christ died and potentially brothers and sisters. We are to think of Moslems and Hindus as our brothers and sisters, even if they fail to reciprocate. And we are to love our neighbours and our enemies, and show compassion. And I believe that must be true not just of our individual attitudes but also of our corporate and national attitudes as well. Christianity is about going the extra mile, a phrase that we owe to Jesus, and that was said in the context of being commanded to do something by an enemy soldier.

A further point that must be considered is *judgment*. I keep coming back to this very difficult point. Oded warned the Israelites that if they persisted in their action against Judah they too would find themselves under the judgement of God. Such judgement typically took the form of natural disasters like famine and plague but also of defeat and

disaster at the hands of other warring nations. The Old Testament testifies frequently to this understanding of history in which national sin leads to national disaster, so that prophets can prophesy what will happen to a people who sin and do not repent and can also identify specific disasters as judgments for specific sinful acts. These judgments may be of two kinds. On the one hand, there is the kind of judgment which can be seen to arise directly out of a sinful action, as when, for example, the person who takes drugs becomes an addict, suffers from consequent bad health and may be reduced to poverty through spending all their resources on the craving. On the other hand, if that same person should be severely injured by a reckless car driver, some people might want to argue that this was another form of judgment on the addict, even though there was no causal relationship between the addiction and being the victim of an accident. So too in the Old Testament many disasters of the second sort are seen as God's working in history to judge and warn his people. And conversely, when people prosper, this may be interpreted as a sign of divine favour and reward.

Now I have a problem here, in that it seems to me that generally speaking Christians today no longer share this way of understanding history; it is not part of our public theology in the way that it was part of Oded's. What are we to make of it? I have no theoretical difficulties with the appropriation of the rest of the story, but what do we do with this aspect of it? Do we threaten governments and armies with divine judgments in history and/or future judgments (which incidentally were hardly

part of the prophetic message)? By what right could we identify a particular disaster as a divine judgment on a specific sinful action? And how do we relate judgment on individuals and judgment on communities to one another?

To show justice and compassion in our own personal lives is a big enough challenge. But let us not forget that this story is about a man called Oded who knew that God was calling him to *tell the government* and the army and the people generally what God commanded them to do. As Christians we have a duty to speak about in the name of God and justice and compassion in the sick society and world in which we live. We have a social and political duty as a church, as well as an individual one. God needs people in his church to act as prophets and speak his words to kings and rulers. Think of what has been achieved by a man like Desmond Tutu in South Africa, and by other African Christians, some of whom have been murdered for their forthrightness. It is never going to be easy, but there is no other way.

The Middle East and Africa may seem very remote from us here, and we are a small group of people, but we can still be effective in our witness for God's principles in national and international life. My tendency as a Christian and as a preacher is to concentrate on our personal spiritual lives and our outreach in evangelism as a congregation, but this is another vital dimension of our Christian living that we are dare not ignore. And we go out from this conference in due course to be different people for having been here, not just knowing new things, but living differently.

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