lFCCOE; 1/7/18; 1 Samuel 9:1-24; Rev. T. Ziegenhals

“The Desire of Israel”

Introduction: Back in the fall we began to explore the books of Samuel. These two books begin to narrate a time after God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, after God had led them through the wilderness into the Promised Land, and after they had begun to live together there as a loose confederation of twelve tribes. At that time we read this commentary: “In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25). It’s a summary statement of the challenging political and moral climate that existed as the Israelites sought, and mostly failed, to live as God’s people within a highly pagan culture. Given this state of affairs, we noted that these books describe Israel’s desire for a king. “Appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have,” we heard the people cry (8:5).

Now, God had warned them that the kings like the nations had would not be all they were cracked up to be. He also reminded them that he had been their king, for a very long time, and had done a darn good job of it! But their desire persisted. So, at the end of chapter 8, we heard God instruct Samuel, his prophet: “Listen to them and give them a king” (8:22). And that’s where we ended, just before Advent began, waiting (a good advent discipline!) to see how that instruction would be carried out.

In effect, we are waiting, really, to see how God will help the Israelites work out and fulfill their desire. Desire is such a key component of our spiritual life. It has the power to lead us either toward, or away from, God. As the wisdom of the Proverbs has it, “What a person desires is unfailing love” (Pv. 19:22). And yet we can look for such love in all the wrong places! Jesus knew this when he asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus is not afraid of this question but asks it because he wants doesn’t want us to stuff or ignore our desires but to get in touch with them, be aware of where they are leading us, and be willing to refine them. As Rama has put it, “The gift of desire is like a string God has tied around our hearts that He can gently tug to help lead us toward what will truly fulfill our deepest longings.”

So, as we pick up and go forward with the Israelites, we want to notice: Where is their longing for a king leading them? How would the God “who satisfies our desires with good things” (Ps. 103:5), use their desire to draw them toward himself? Ultimately, what kind of king will truly fill and satisfy our hearts? In the passage before us we begin to get a few hints as we find Saul looking for donkeys but finding a feast.

I. Looking for Donkeys

 A. It’s an odd transition, really. God’s charge to Samuel to give Israel a king, followed by a genealogy of a man named Kish, which included having a tall and handsome young son, would lead a reader to believe that a grand announcement was to follow. Instead, we see Kish charge this son, Saul, to take a servant and undertake the rather mundane task of going to look for some of his dad’s donkeys that had gotten lost! After wandering for a while, Saul suggests they give up so his father won’t start to worry. When the servant suggests they go and see a man with a reputation for godliness who might be able to help direct them, Saul hesitates again for he has nothing to give this man. Fortunately, the servant digs in his pocket and comes up with some loose change, which he reasons will be enough to satisfy the prophet, and so they continue on in search of this man of God, and the donkeys. It’s an auspicious beginning. Saul doesn’t strike the reader as a very kingly prospect. Without the help of his servant, Saul, it seems, would be as lost as the donkeys!

 B. But what’s interesting to ponder for a moment, especially knowing that in the big picture, Saul is God’s intended for Israel’s first king, is how this all comes about. It comes as Saul is simply engaged in the ordinary, mundane stuff of life, like looking for livestock that has wandered away. Can we notice that God is at work, accomplishing his purposes, through our ordinary, routine, and familiar tasks?

Illustration: Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite monk who lived in the 17th c. in France, never became a priest but spent most of his life working in the kitchen of the monastery where he served. In that kitchen, he spent a significant portion of his time peeling potatoes. Yet his reflections and writings, collected in a book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*, would become a spiritual classic and guide about how seemingly mundane, daily tasks, whether it’s changing a diaper, shoveling snow, or even just showing up for work every day, as we are faithful in carrying them out can draw us closer to God and be used by God for his purposes.

 C. I also wonder, as I ponder Saul’s search for donkeys, and think about the kind of king we need, if that king would need to be one who, like a good shepherd, was willing to search out the lost and not give up until he finds them…?

II. Meeting at a Well

 A. As Saul and his servant move on, they meet a group of women who have come to a local well to draw water. They ask the women if they know where the prophet is and the women direct Saul and his servant to a feast where Samuel will be blessing a sacrifice. What’s interesting is that these scenes in the Bible where women come out to a well to draw water, are scenes that often lead to a marriage (cf. Isaac, Ge. 24; Jacob, Ge. 29; Moses, Ex 2). Abraham, for example, instructs his servant to go and find a wife for his oldest son, Isaac. The servant ends up at a well and there meets a woman named Rebecca. She agrees to come back with the servant to become Isaac’s wife, but first the servant must feast at her family home. Add to this the language we see later in 2 Samuel 5 where, when David is confirmed as king. The people declare, “we are your own flesh and blood,” literally, we are your bone and flesh. This declaration echoes Adam’s cry when he first sees Eve: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Ge. 2:23). It suggests that in acknowledging David as king, the people are recognizing him as their “husband,” as the husband of Israel, as they acknowledge themselves, in the process, to be his bride.

 B. Taken together, one commentator (Tim Chester) suggests that while Saul doesn’t get married here, he does go on to a feast. Could it suggest that his experience at the well, and then at the feast, points to his role as the royal husband of God’s people? It should move us to ask: What kind of husband will he be? And this might then bring to mind the apostle Paul’s identification, in his letter to the Ephesians, of Jesus as the husband who gave his life for his bride, the church (Eph. 5:25-33). So as we continue to ask the question: What kind of king do we need? the answer is that we, as a bride, need a king to be the kind of husband who is willing to lay down his life for us, like a good shepherd would for his sheep.

III. Eating at a Feast

 A. Well, then, what about this feast? We hear that as Samuel was making his way to this meal, he is intercepted by God who reveals to him that he would meet a man the next day who he was to appoint ruler over Israel. The exchange between God and Samuel is actually a wonderful peek into the heart of God. God, we read, had heard the cries of his people. Even though it meant that they had rejected him as king, he was going to go ahead, respond to their cries, meet their desire, and raise up a man, Saul, whose role would be to protect the Israelites both externally and internally. Externally he would deliver them from the attacks of the Philistines. Internally he would govern or “restrain” them from living as they saw fit. It’s a sweet picture of how God, remarkably, responds to our failures and misplaced desires by pouring out his grace, meeting us where we are and then beginning to “tug us” toward himself.

 B. The feast described is the culmination of a peace, or fellowship offering. It’s called that because it’s a celebration that symbolizes the peace or fellowship that comes to exist between God and mankind through the offering of a sacrifice. After the sacrifice, the participants then eat the meat that had been offered. The leg, or thigh, was saved for the priest (Lev. 3; 7:33-34). At this feast, the thigh was given to Saul, probably identifying him as God’s anointed ruler, and acknowledging the sacredness of his kingship as the Lord’s anointed. As it was the portion for the priest, it perhaps also hints at the priestly function of the king we need, one who would take on the role of mediator to bring both God and man back together, into the peace of sweet fellowship with him.

So as we begin to think about desire, know that desire is not a bad thing. The desire of Israel for a king, for one who would protect and guide and direct them is a good and proper desire. But it could not be filled in the way they imagined it, with a king like everyone else had. In his grace, God planned ultimately to lead them, and us, to the only king who would truly meet that desire.

As I reflect on all of this I can’t help but fast forward ahead to Palm Sunday! That was the day, just days before he would be crucified, that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey his disciples had found for him. Recall the symbolism of that beast. For a leader to come into a city riding on a horse meant that he had come to make war. But to come riding on a donkey meant he had come to make peace. Jesus then went to a feast, the Passover, through which he would explain to his followers that he would make peace between them and God by giving up his life, as a good shepherd, as a loving husband, would do.

Jesus, really, is the king that satisfies our desires with good things. He is the king that we need. He is the one who truly quenches the longing for unfailing love that lies in the deepest part of our heart. Let’s meet him at the feast where he has come to bring us peace.