**21st September 2014**

**1 Samuel 8**

Well, they said NO. Scotland voted against independence in Thursday’s referendum. But it was close. The fact that over 1.5m British citizens voted to break away from the rest of the UK, the fact that a majority in Scotland's biggest city - Glasgow - backed independence, the fact that the Westminster establishment briefly thought this vote was lost will caution that it’s not over yet.

There will be repercussions. Imagine you had three other siblings in the family. One of them decides they were thinking about leaving the family. The other three pleaded with them to stay even offering them incentives to do. They decide somewhat ambivalently to stay and not start making all sorts of demands. What do you think will happen?

Let’s sit back and wait.

Phillip Hodson a family counsellor, wrote about how to heal the rifts when partners have a disagreement, look like splitting, but then want to work at reconciling their differences.

As a marriage therapist he often gets the question ‘Where did it all go wrong?’ Part of the answer says that when relationships fail and we need to part, we exaggerate our differences in order to destroy the remaining ties of affection. Then we "present our demands" to gain power over the situation and secure the outcome.

So how can a warring couple heal their differences in a situation where geography and family entanglements ensure continuous contact?

He says often when couples in counselling are hurling abuse at each other he has to point at the floor in front of them. This is where I've asked them to imagine their poor relationship. "It seems unwise to kill it completely," I tell them. "You have children. You need to negotiate. You cannot entirely obliterate the other side. Don't we have a duty to find some sort of modus vivendi?"

Admittedly this would have been a sight to behold in the event that two polarised nations have to divide their matrimonial property, pensions and purses. That would entail the mother and father of all battles but the principle stands. In any domestic conflict, if one side entirely "wins", the relationship will get slaughtered.

The second rule is based on a cod American proverb: "Walk a mile in my moccasins before you judge me." For many people throughout Scotland, this weekend will be filled with grief. Dreams must die - or at least be radically postponed. Bereavement is a necessary process for all humans who experience a loss. We cannot go "round" it. Only through it. It will involve a range of emotional stresses from fury to despair, denial to depression. Both sides should therefore prepare for a fresh emotional ordeal. This will involve possible further unpleasantness. But only if we show ultimate respect for the suffering loser will the situation heal. It's not an impossible goal - think of Martin McGuinness giving an emotional tribute to Ian Paisley.

The final rule is that people mean what they do, not what they say. Forget all the hot air and blather from extreme politicians or the lunatic fringe. We will now be required to act collectively for the next passage of history. Every single one of us could think about becoming better behaved for the common good.

As counsellors try to explain to reconciling couples, you can't just sweep your differences under the carpet and restart. You cannot magically regain the trust. You have to begin at rock bottom taking it in small stages to discover reliable common ground and speak with tact about the legacy in dispute. Then demonstrate by your daily actions whether you care to bury the hatchet or you don't.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Political changes, rejection, disagreements, are the stuff of our bible reading today as we continue the story of Samuel. Last week we saw how he was called by God to be the priest for the people of Israel, how he succeeded Eli, who no longer heard the word of the Lord. He is now an old man and has appointed his sons as judges in Israel. A bit like Eli story, the children of the great man don’t do their father any credit and go after dishonest gain and accept bribes. So the people come to Samuel and demand change.

Just like in the aftermath of the Scottish Referendum, there is a clamour for change. Things can’t stay the same – something has to change. CHANGE ILLUSTRATION

In the passage from 1 Samuel 8, we hear echoes of perhaps a similarly divisive political climate in ancient Israel. *Things have got to change, the system is broken*, we hear the people telling Samuel, their aging statesman. What's hard for us to imagine, though, living in a 21st century democracy, is the kind of change that elders of Israel were urging.  "Give us a king to govern us!" they demanded in 1 Samuel 8:6.

It is not entirely clear why the ancient Israelites transitioned from a tribal society into a monarchy in the early Iron Age (sometime in the late 11th or early 10th century BC). Up until this point, the most significant transition between leaders in the biblical text occurs when Moses dies and Joshua, Moses's assistant, takes over. After that, the biblical text describes a fairly haphazard state of affairs in which charismatic leaders (judges) rose up from time to time to lead groups of Israelites, generally into battle, culminating in the figure of Samuel. As the author of Judges records, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (17:6).

Monarchy was certainly not a new institution in the Ancient Near East, having deep roots in Mesopotamia and Egypt,  *as well as nations surrounding Israel. Israel was perhaps unusual in not having instituted a monarchy. But King Saul rose to power in a period characterized by unprecedented upheaval among Israel's neighbours. "Throughout most of its recorded history the Israelites had been dominated by its larger, more powerful neighbours...Egypt to the south, Babylon and Assyria to the east, Aram/Syria to the north, and still farther north, the Hittites." During the reigns of Saul and David, however, most of these nations were distracted by their own internal issues. It's possible that this reprieve gave the "tribes of Israel a unique opportunity, not only to cast off foreign domination but to form a mini-empire of their own..."1*

*In addition to the opportunities created by this temporary power vacuum, ancient Israel was likely experiencing internal turmoil due to competing coalitions within the tribal society. The author of the text hints at this possibility at the beginning the 1 Samuel 8 when he frames the story by pointing out that Samuel had grown old and that he had appointed his sons as judges, "yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside for gain; they took bribes and perverted justice" (verses 1-3).*

*This same information is immediately repeated in verses 4-5, when these words are put in the mouths of the elders of Israel who come to Samuel who tell Samuel, "You are old...  appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations."*

For some, a monarchy might have meant a more reliable system of governance which might allow for more equitable rule than seemed probable under the leadership of Samuel's wayward sons. *For others, and not as obvious in the text itself, it's possible that the elders represented an elite segment of society who would also stand to benefit under a monarchy, the 1% if you will. For them, having a king would create the possibility for significant personal gain, a society in which both power and resources were consolidated in the hands of a few.*

The text doesn't provide any further clues as to who more precisely was interested in a king or even why, *suggesting variously that "the elders of the people of Israel" (8:4), "the people who were asking for a king" (8:10), "the people of Israel" (8:22), or simply "the people" (8:19, 21)*. The only stated rationale for such dramatic social change: they wanted someone to govern them, they wanted to be like the other nations, and they wanted a king to go out before them to fight their battles.

Samuel and God give distinctly negative responses. Upon hearing the people's request, the narrator reports that "the thing displeased Samuel" and that "Samuel prayed to the Lord," presumably about his concerns.

God comforts Samuel, saying, in effect, 'Don't worry, this is not about you. Look what I've done for them in the past, and look how they've rejected me.' God continues speaking, "Now then, listen to their voice; only -- you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the way of the king..." (8:9). Samuel goes on, at great length, to demonstrate that a king is not necessarily the solution to all their problems. In fact, in his view, a king is just the beginning of a completely new set of problems.

Two things I want to say about this interesting passage. One is about politics. One is about God.

This passage is on the face of it all about politics. The public agenda – who holds power and how power is used. As we approach harvest season, let us remind ourselves that the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it. Belief in God extends to all realms – including politics, the economy as well as personal salvation. Much of the Bible is devoted to the issues of power, politics, economics and justice.

Perhaps the people wanted a King to govern them well. Perhaps Samuel reacted as he did because he felt rejected. The text just tells us how Samuel warns the people about how concentrating power in one individual will be dangerous and oppressive.

I love playing the board game Monopoly. My kids love playing it – but it always ends in a row. It seems to bring out the worst in us. That competitive element, trying to dominate others and showing no mercy gives a bad atmosphere in the house for a few hours after the game. Monopoly may be a board game but of course it also mirrors economic life. The aim of most businesses is to have a monopoly: for them to be the sole provider of the good or service. They can then control supply and demand and therefore the price and maximise their profit. We as consumers, hope the government will try and protect us against monopolies: as winter approaches get ready for the next round of claims about price fixing among the energy companies. We all need electricity and gas which can lead to the power of the suppliers being abused.

God and Samuel try to warn the people of the dangers of monopoly. God says it ends in bondage, the very bondage that God fought so hard to free his people from in Egypt under the grip of Pharaoh, the last King that the Israelites were under. If you have another King this is what he will do – he will take from you: he will take your sons for his army; he will take your daughters to work in his service; he will take your crops, he will take your money to pay for his wars and his government, he will take your land and give it as a reward to his loyal subjects. It is all taking. There is no sharing and giving. This Is all taking. In ancient Israel and in all other communities that organize power for some at the expense of others, there is a rejection of what God holds dear.

Beware people with too much power. One of the reasons we have a conciliar system in the United Reformed Church is because we have learnt through painful experience over church history that power in the hands of individuals, like ministers or church secretary’s for example, can corrupt and lead to abuse. So power is devolved into councils – where there is safety in numbers, where together we discern the mind of Christ. Someone may come with a word from the Lord, but that needs to be tested by the Body of Christ and be accountable to the body of Christ.

I wrote in the Citizen Newspaper last week about the formation of the Church of Scotland: I said the ‘Yes’ campaign for Scottish independence has said this was an opportunity for Scotland to free itself from the Westminster elite and the Establishment. There is nothing new in this sentiment.

At the beginning of the 16th century Scotland was a poor country fearing it would be overrun by the English. It strengthened its ties with Catholic France via Mary Queen of Scots. The Reformation had happened on the continent and the English national church had become Protestant thanks to Henry VIII and his desire to have a male heir! Those who believed in Scottish independence were more concerned that Scotland would be annexed by France than England and so in 1560 the Scottish Parliament adopted Protestantism as the official creed. But the Kirk (Scottish term for church) would be founded on democratic lines through the Presbyterian system where power is held in councils not in individuals, unlike the Church of England which had bishops and a privileged elite.

John Knox was a radical social and religious reformer and he is a legendary figure in Scottish history for good and for ill. He wanted the wealth of the church to be used not just for its running but for education and poor relief. But the nobles did not share his dream. There was a real struggle with the Establishment and their vested interests.

I suggested that the influence of the Church of Scotland may have waned in contemporary Scotland but it was a major factor in shaping the nation. In older Scotland it was a political phenomenon standing for local government by the people as opposed to centralised and authoritarian government. By its representative character it was planned to express public feeling from the popular level upwards until it determined national policy. It was the Kirk opposed Charles I, whilst it was Parliament who did so in England. Charles II mused that Presbyterianism was no religion for a gentleman.

I concluded that the Scots have got dissent and disestablishment in their blood. You could have blamed the Kirk if the Yes campaign had won on Thursday.

What bout in our personal relationships. Does someone dominate? Do they have all the power, call all the shots and therefore make unfair demands? Who is the one always taking? Take take take. Where is the give give give, share share share.

Monopolies are dangerous things.

Finally let’s look at God’s response to all this.

God, like Samuel registers the request for a king as a personal attack, yet God tells Samuel to go ahead and give them a king. We are left wondering if God authorizes this change in affairs because God wants to punish the people or because God sees new potential, some fresh air, in a different form of governance. Maybe God is just as ready for a change as the people, but just wasn't willing to initiate it. Did God need a nudge?

It is remarkable that God concedes everything. Let the people have what they want. God does not resist, does not argue, does not rage, and does not retaliate. There seems however to be a sadness, a deep sadness that something precious is being forfeited by Israel and Israel seems not to notice. They want now to be like the other nations. They want a king, rather than together share power and look to God. God seems almost resigned to the destructive enactment of greedy public power and policy that it will become about taking rather than sharing and giving. But God lets them do it. Let’s them run their own affairs.

God lets us make mistakes. God lets us live by the consequences of our actions. God gives freedom. Yet the testimony of scripture, from the life of Israel to the church today, is that God remains faithful. Though the people reject him, God does not reject his people. Though the people do not listen to advice and go their won way, God does not walk off in a huff. God remains.

And so the gospel is constantly retold. God loved us before we loved God. Christ dies for us even though we are still sinners. Great is thy faithfulness. Great therefore is our hope.

With help from Karla Suomala <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1342>

1Kugel, James, *How to Read the Bible:  A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 447-448.

1. [**Phillip Hodson**](http://www.philliphodson.co.uk/)*is a psychotherapist and Fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy* [*http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29258209*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29258209) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)