**2nd November 2014**

**1 Samuel 16**

Chances are that you have been rejected by other people because you weren’t good looking enough, or athletic enough, rich enough, or cool enough – whatever that is.

There is a story I heard about a teenager trying to get a date. He got so desperate that a mate to fix him up on a blind date. His mate said he had fixed a date with his cousin, a girl called Doris. The boy said he had never met a girl called Doris and he didn’t fancy the idea of a blind date. What if I don’t like her? His friend said ‘don’t worry. Doris is a terrific girl – trust me she is a real looker. But if you don’t believe me I’ll tell you how to get out of the date if you don’t like the way she looks. This is what I do; I go to a girl’s front door to pick her up, and when she opens the door, I check her out. If I like what I see, then great, we’re all set. But if she is ugly, I fake an asthma attack. I go ‘aaahhhhhrrrgg!

The girl asks ‘what’s wrong?’ and I say ‘it’s my asthma’. And so we have to call the date off. Just like that, no problem and no hard feelings.

‘The boy says ‘well OK, it sounds easy enough I’ll give it a go’

So the evening comes when he turns up to pick up Doris. He knocks on the door and she comes to open it. He takes one look at her and to his surprise he realises his friend was right. She was beautiful! He stands there not knowing what to say, transfixed by her beauty.

She meanwhile takes one look at him and starts an asthma attack ‘aaahhrrggg!’

The key verse for today says that God does not look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. When God takes a look at us he thinks we are beautiful, created in his image and longs for us to have a heart like His, one that reaches out and loves all people, regardless of their looks. Image isn’t everything.

We have been away for a week’s holiday in Norfolk meeting up with old friends. One place we visited was Sandringham, the country residence of the Royal Family. As you may imagine it is set in palatial grounds and is an impressive Victorian stately home. Walking around the ground floor rooms, we could imagine the Queen sharing Christmas Dinner with all her family. We were told she likes to decorate the Christmas tree herself. In one room she has a large felted table which she does jigsaw puzzles on. One was half completed – I was tempted to try and add a piece! In contrast to these homely domestic images most of the rooms have extensive collections of swords, guns, armour, helmets breastplates on the wall – symbols of power and warfare, conquest and might. It gives a heady atmosphere of power and empire. Kings and Queens of the past obviously saw fit to decorate their country retreat with such artefacts. In other words Sandringham gave out mixed messages and images to me about royalty.

We are back looking at the Old Testament in our journey through the Bible and we pick up where we left off. The Israelites wanted a king to rule over them and be like the other nations. God warned them that a king would make them pay and bring inequality to their society. The people still wanted a king and so God told Samuel the priest to give them a King. Saul became the first king of Israel but it isn’t long before he doesn’t make the grade and is rejected by God (was he ever accepted you may ask?).

The Bible tells us that part of Saul’s attraction for the position was that he was a magnificent physical specimen. He was young, tall; he made a good public image and seemed to have the charisma to rally the people. But those characteristics don’t always ensure quality leadership. But while he was significant to the people, he was disobedient to God.

Saul began his reign as a humble servant. The Bible says the Spirit of God was upon him. He had some early success in battle. But then in chapter 13 things start to go wrong. Saul is outnumbered by the Philistines and worries about his chances. Samuel has told him to wait seven days and then God would grant him victory, but some of his troop’s flee scared of defeat and to stop the disintegration of morale among his army Saul’s performs a religious ceremony. Saul wasn’t authorised to do this and Samuel tells him off when he does finally arrive. His lack of faith and trust is revealed. He acted for pragmatic reasons because his troops were scattering – but his actions came from doubt and mistrust. In chapter 13 verse 13 this judgement is made: ‘*you have acted foolishly! You have not kept the command laid upon you by the Lord your God; if you had, he would have established your dynasty over Israel for all time. But now your line will not endure; the Lord will seek out a man after his own heart.’*

It is breath-taking to imagine what could have been. Maybe we all play the game ‘what if’… in our lives. But Jesus could have come from the line of Saul not the line of David but the tilt of the Bible toward David and away from Saul emerges out of something as trivial as Saul acting in pragmatism not in faith.

In chapter 15 Samuel tells Saul to listen to the voice of the Lord. He is to "annihilate" the Amalekites, because of their opposition to Israel after their escape from Egyptian slavery. The word in Hebrew is *herem*. It means to totally and utterly destroy. Genocide, annihilation. It is religiously sanctioned slaughter. A Holy War.

I have spoken about the problematic passages of the bible before. Atheists use them to say that religion is poison and causes war and we would be better off without it. History does demonstrate that people of religion can be very intolerant over matters about which they feel strongly. The normal list includes the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Irish question, Islamic jihadists and more. We can put our hands up. But it wasn’t the religion of Jesus Christ, I would argue, that they represented in their violence; it was the religion of men mostly.

The Bible does have many accounts of divinely sanctioned violence. Those who want to hold a view that every part of the Bible is authoritative explain this away as the seriousness of God’s judgement on sin – the same way they would validate war as a means of God’s judgement through earthly authorities. If Jesus came to fully reveal the nature of God I would suggest we may need to be critical of such views, at the very least suggest that god wants us to grow up and now follow in the way of Christ, which is basically how John Calvin explained these difficult passages.

The atheist who want to do away with religion because it promotes violence obviously don’t know their history. If secularism and democracy are the answers then Hitler was elected by democratic means and Stalin and Mao Tse Tung were both atheists yet would kill millions.

The scrap yard of the human heart gives birth to all sorts of passions as we express our anger and fear. We don’t need religion to give us an excuse, though sometimes, sadly, it does.

As we come to remembrance Sunday we can recall how faith in God has often been used to encourage the people to fight with passion and certainty that their cause was right and the war was a battle of good over evil. As our troops return from Afghanistan one must applaud their professionalism for serving their country in a disputed war where there has been much debate over what good we were doing out there. On a battlefield you obey orders - you don’t debate them - and as we wear our poppies in the next few weeks we remember those who obeyed and paid the ultimate sacrifice. 453 – to be precise, in the case of British casualties in Afghanistan in 13 years.

Saul did not obey orders. He saves both the king of Amalek along with the very best of his livestock partly because he listened to the people and not to God and partly in order, as he says twice, to "sacrifice to the Lord" in Gilgal, the sacred and central sanctuary.

When Samuel goes to meet Saul, Saul says I have obeyed the Lord’s commands.’ But Samuel said, ‘then why do I hear cattle mooing and sheep bleating?’ You know: “You did just what God said? You destroyed everything? Then how come I can hear the dead?” Saul tries to worm his way out of it by saying that the only reason he didn't destroy everything was so he would have something left to sacrifice to the Lord. Sounds good but it won’t wash because the Lord didn’t tell Saul to spare some for sacrifice. It’s why Samuel responds to this weak excuse this way in vs: 22 –

“What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice?

Obedience is far better than sacrifice. In other words, God cares more about obedience than any religious observance you can possible do.

It chimes with the famous words of the prophet Amos – who condemned the people of god for all their religious shows of piety: away with your religious feats I cannot stand your assemblies… but let justice flow like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream (Amos 5. 21-24). The Prophet Micah said the same thing adding this is what the Lord wants and requires of you: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6.8).

Jesus would say never mind the words but by the fruit of their lives you can tell if there heart is good.

You can’t play games with God. He sees to the heart.

There is something tragic about the person of Saul. This story is one of the uncomfortable stories of the Bible. David finds favour despite committing appalling sins- such as adultery and murder, of which Saul is never found guilty. Why therefore is Saul so harshly judged? David after all his wrong doing found forgiveness and kept Bathsheba as his wife, yet Saul seemed doomed to fail right from the start of his reign.

Is he brought low because of external circumstances or his own inner inadequacies? Some commentators have suggested that Saul might have done better had he been less conscientious in his desire for the Lord’s guidance (sitting waiting for instructions instead of expecting guidance as he moved forward) and less dependent on reassurance that he was in favour whether with God or man. He is characterized by an anxious uncertainty that makes him unable to act and becomes indecisive and swayed by others and not reliant on the word of God. In contrast to David, Saul’s heart wasn’t right. At crucial moments he doubted, he didn’t trust, he didn’t listen. All these characteristics made him the person who was not after God’s heart.

He ends up becoming mentally unbalanced and terrorised by evil spirits.

**November has just started. Men have become used to growing interesting facial hair during November to raise funds for men's cancers. Now, the organisation behind the moustache-growing challenge is tackling another taboo - mental health.**

Justin Coughlan, the Australian co-founder of Movember, likens men to cars.

"They need regular servicing, and if you don't look after them they end up broken."

The implication is that men do not look after themselves until it is too late.

The statistic that really shocks him is that 77% of suicides in the UK are male. Every day, an average of 12 men decide to end their lives.

**“Start Quote**

Movember's aim is to invest in projects in the UK which break down the stigma of mental health issues, which keep people mentally well through talking and sharing their experiences and which offer help and advice when needed.

Saul s an interesting character study of someone who buckled under pressure. Crucially he didn’t talk through his options – but stubbornly decided to do what he thought best. David would have a broken heart – a contrite heart, he would be open to listen to God and to others.

Samuel is told to go and find another king who will be a man after God’s own heart. He is instructed to go to Bethlehem and a man called Jesse and take part in a religious ceremony. There he tells Jesse that one of his sons will be the next anointed King. Seven sons are presented before Samuel. But God has told Samuel not to judge by outward appearance and stature. ‘The Lord does not see as a mortal sees; mortals see only appearances but the Lord sees into the heart’. Each of the seven sons are not chosen. Samuel asks if there are any more. Jesse says there is the youngest – who is looking after sheep. David is fetched for and God says anoint him.

It would have emphasised the point that God does not judge on outward appearances had David been described as over weight and looking like the back end of a bus, or a hay cart in David’s day. However the Bible adds that David was handsome with ruddy cheeks and bright eyes. It is a clue that David’s good looks will get him into trouble later in life – outward appearances have power – we cannot deny that – and they often mislead.

There’s a lot of truth in the saying ‘a person who is nice to you, but not nice to others, is not a nice person’.

That’s one of the reasons that Jesus pointed to the outcast of the world, those who were poor, in prison, those considered the least and said in effect ‘those people are just like me. If you love me, then you will also love them (Matthew 25.3111-46).

Anyone can love the healthy the successful and the glamorous. There’s little nobility or courage in that. But God calls us to a higher standard – to love the world just as He does.

David will be a King after God’s heart because despite his shortcomings he will consider those least in his society.

The other day lots of kids dressed up for Hallowe’en in scary costumes. A scientific researcher gathered 10 volunteers for a special psychological study called Scar Experiment". Separating the volunteers into 10 different cubicles without mirrors, she explained that the purpose of the study was to examine how other people would respond to a stranger with a physical deformity, such as a facial scar.

Using makeup tricks straight out of Hollywood, the scientist put bloody and gruesome scars on each volunteer's left cheek. She showed each volunteer the new "scar" with a small hand-held mirror and then put the mirror away.

The researcher's final step in each cubicle was to tell each volunteer that she needed to put some finishing powder on his or her scar to prevent it from smearing. In reality, she used a wet cloth to wipe off each scar. The volunteers, however, believed they still had scars on their faces. Each volunteer was then sent out into the waiting rooms of different medical offices with instructions to notice how strangers in the office responded to the scar.

After the appointed time, all 10 volunteers returned with the same report. They noticed that strangers were more rude to them, less kind to them, and stared at their "scar".

Sometimes we become so occupied with our own personal flaws (physical or otherwise) that we often assume that other people consider our flaws as repulsive as we do. In reality, most people hardly notice the things that are wrong with us. Because our flaws consume us we may act towards others as if they disapproved of us. That makes it hard to form friendships. On the other hand, having a healthy self-image or taking a positive view of ourselves frees us to enjoy healthier relationships.

Ultimately of course a healthy self-image comes from knowing that God thinks highly of you. He created you and loves you as his child. When you take time to listen to God’s voice telling you who you really are, you will be less likely to worry about what others think of you.

May we be wise enough not to judge on outward appearances. May we all be people after God’s own heart.