**16th June 2024**

**Call to worship**

Our God looks on us and loves us;
come with thanks and praise.
Our God sees us and knows us;
come in worship and adoration.
Our God leads us and cares for us;
come to listen and go out in faith.

**A gathering prayer**

Thank you, Lord, that you have been faithful to us
through all the changes of our lives;
we praise you, for there is no end to your faithfulness.
Help us today to be open to you,
and to trust you through all the changes still to come.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Heavenly Father, you see us just as we are, deep inside – not just the outside stuff.
You remind us that it is our hearts that need to be changed.
As we come before you today, we pray that you will show us your pattern for our lives.
Make us willing to change and be changed. God chose David even though he was the youngest son.
God, who can change and equip anyone for anything, chooses us.
Show us anew how privileged we are to belong to you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Our God, who never changes, has ultimate power to change us.
**We adore you; we worship you; we raise our hands to you.**
Our God is with us in our smallest and biggest moments.
**We adore…**
Our God anoints us with his spirit. **We adore…**
Our God wants us to change to be more like him. **We adore…**
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, forgive us when we don’t see change as a positive thing;
when we try to hang on to things because we are used to them;
when we don’t acknowledge that we need change, and only you can do it.
**Forgive us, Lord, help us to change and grow.**
We often only look at outward appearance, make snap judgements, reject someone on looks alone, see the negative and not the positive. We might not cope with a change in circumstances. We might try to change others but are not open to change ourselves.
**Forgive us, Lord, help us to change and grow.**
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Our unchangeable Lord doesn’t see us as others see us. God sees the whole picture. God has heard the cries of our hearts and forgives us. Pure and simple. No questions asked. Bless you, Lord. **Amen.**

**A prayer of thanksgiving**

Samuel anointed David with oil. From that day on he was a changed man, powerfully filled with your Spirit. We thank you, Lord, that when we trust you, that can be our experience too.
When we are prepared to change, you change us.
‘Changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before you,
lost in wonder, love and praise.’
**Amen.**

**1 Samuel 16**

**Sermon**

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 fixed him up on a blind 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 are back looking at the Old Testament and the establishment of Kings and asking questions about power, leadership and society. Very topical as we enter the last few weeks of a General Election.

Last week Shona looked at how 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.

How much is enough? In April 2023, there were 171 billionaires in the UK, and 3 million food parcels distributed by The Trussell Trust between April 2022 and March 2023. The gap between the well-off and poor people is growing. No one disputes that. This does not help build a healthy society. The Israelites’ choice for monarchy brought consequences. Their society would become less equal and their children would be forced to serve royal luxury. Elsewhere (Deuteronomy 17:14-20), legislation limits the king’s wealth and display. Should our society seek ways of limiting the wealth of the mega-rich, in line with God’s teaching and, if so, how?

So much emphasis in this election is on self interest – what’s in it for me. Are we concerned about what builds a good society?

The people in Samuel’s time 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. To stop the disintegration of morale among his army Saul 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 towards 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.

To say this is a problematic passage of the bible is an understatement. Atheists 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 say it wasn’t the religion of Jesus Christ 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 God wants us to grow up and now follow in the way of Christ, which is basically how John Calvin explained these difficult passages. Read them through Christ lens and say was this really what God said?

The atheist who wants 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.

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?’

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 possibly 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 their heart is good.’(Matthew 7.15-20)

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 going on to commit appalling sins- such as adultery and murder, of which Saul is never found guilty. Why therefore is Saul so harshly judged?

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.

Mental health is a big issue. On this Father’s Day the statistic that really shocks is that 77% of suicides in the UK are male. Every day, an average of 12 men decide to end their lives.

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.

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 overweight 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 God does.

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

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.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord, as we come to you today, we think of different changes that have happened in our lives – those that have had positive effects on us and those that were very hard. We know that you were with us through all the changes, even when we couldn’t immediately see you at work. As we focus on the coming few days and weeks, give us the confidence to know that you are still with us, always with us, through change and when everything stays the same.

Changeless God, we come to you.
**Help us to know you are near.**

We pray for those facing difficult changes in their lives: perhaps through ill health, bereavement, unemployment or separation from loved ones. Lord, we name anyone known to us who is struggling in this way…. We ask that your peace and comfort be upon them. Reassure them that, although their circumstances may change, you do not. Give them the courage to face their future knowing that you are holding their hand.

Changeless God, we come to you.
**Help us to know you are near.**

We pray for those who need to make difficult decisions about their future. Give them wisdom and insight. Help them to see the positives, where change can bring more peace of mind or freedom. Encourage them to go forward into this new phase with the comfort of knowing that you will go before them to prepare the way.

Changeless God, we come to you.
**Help us to know you are near.**

We pray for those who are looking at exciting changes… maybe a new job, new school, university or college. We think of all the young people in our community soon to finish school for the summer, especially those who are leaving primary or secondary school. Strengthen them in preparation for the new adventures ahead of them and help them to go forward to new things with open minds and hearts ready to make new friends, learn new things and deepen their understanding of how to live well in their community.

Changeless God, we come to you.
**Help us to know you are near.**

We pray for all countries where elections are taking place, where there may be massive changes that will have a huge impact on the citizens of the countries concerned. We pray for those newly elected to office, that they will be people of integrity and work towards changing their nations for the good of all those who live there. We pray for those who will be voted out and the changes that will make in their personal lives. Help them to be peacemakers…

Changeless God, we come to you.
**Help us to know you are near.**

We pray for those whose lives never seem to change at all. Those who face daily struggles with their health, those who are depressed, stressed or anxious and who find each day a challenge. We remember those who live alone and feel that every day is exactly the same as the last. Lord, where can we bring change into these situations? Go before us and guide us to bring healing and hope into difficult situations.

Changeless God, we come to you.
**Help us to know you are near.**

Lord, we pray for our church. Maybe there are big changes happening…. or maybe things have stayed the same for a long time. Lord, help us to see where trying new things and doing things differently may be effective. Help us to see where leaving things just as they are can also bring growth. Give our church leaders wisdom and discernment to listen to how you want our church to move forward as a witness in our community.

Changeless God, we come to you.
**Help us to know you are near.**

[In this Father’s Day in the UK, we pray for fathers we know, especially any facing change right now. We particularly pray for new fathers as the changes in their lives will be hugely significant at the moment. And we remember those who have recently lost their fathers – help them adjust to the loss and sorrow that that change brings.

Changeless God, we come to you.
**Help us to know you are near.]**

Lord, as we go forward into a new week, show us where you want us to change. Help us to listen to you, particularly in our homes and families. Perhaps there is something important that we need to change that will bring reconciliation, or help someone, or just make the lives of those around us easier… Speak to us and nudge us towards those changes. Lord, maybe you have some big changes that you want us to make. Give us the courage to go forward with you into the future, knowing that you have gone ahead of us to prepare the way. Show us the guiding light of your presence as we step out into new ways of being who you want us to be.

Changeless God, we come to you.
**Help us to know you are near. Help us to listen to you. And help us to follow where you lead.**

**Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Shuffle a pack of ordinary playing cards and give everyone a card (more than one pack if numbers require). Invite everyone to find someone else with a card of the same suit, and then to pray together according to the symbol on their cards, bearing in mind the need to keep personal information confidential:

hearts = love: pray for change in the lives and circumstances of those with relationship problems.
diamonds = wealth: pray for those with financial challenges or problems.
spades = work: pray for those with work-related issues.
clubs = conflict: pray for those who need peace.

**A sending out prayer**

Thank you, Lord, that you love us and you can change us:
help us to trust you this week.
Thank you, Lord, that you love this world and you can change it:
help us to work with you this week. Amen.