

Sermon (7/8/18, 2 Samuel 5: 1-10):

Not long ago, the current Attorney General of our nation quoted Romans 13 as an argument for separating parents from children at the US-Mexican border. His use of this text understandably caused a significant amount of debate.

The passage he quoted was, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” It’s a strange and odd text, especially given who its author is - the Apostle Paul.

By the time Paul writes this, he himself had experienced all kinds of hostility from political authorities. He had been beaten, threatened, imprisoned, and eventually he would be killed for the laws he had broken. It’s impossible to claim that Paul was silent in the face of the unjust and oppressive practices of Rome’s political structure even though he was submissive to the consequences of those actions.

All of this reminds us of just how difficult it is to draw a straight line from current day events to a Biblical text like Romans 13.

This is certainly also the case when it comes to today’s passage from 2 Samuel. Initially it seems of little consequence for us today. It’s the kind of passage that, when first reading it, forces me to wonder why it’s even included in the lectionary. What could I possibly say about it that might be even vaguely interesting on a hot July day?

This moment that 2 Samuel recounts, is more significant than we might think, though. In essence, it follows a long period of civil wars; of brutal battles, of sons being drafted and killed, of mothers and wives being left behind as widows, of bloody skirmishes that left many lives and hearts wounded and maimed.

This is David’s third anointing. The first, as you might recall, was done by Samuel while Saul was still King. The second was done in Hebron when David was anointed King of Judah. Perhaps, this third time is the most significant, however, as the Elders from all twelve tribes of Israel finally coalesce around David to anoint him as their King, initiating an era of long sought after peace.

Saul, David’s predecessor and the first anointed King of Israel, had

pretty much ruined the term ‘King’. Once King, Saul quickly set himself up as Sovereign, in place of God – constantly bullying rather than blessing.

God’s original intent behind making Saul King was that God would remain the ultimate authority of communal life. Saul failed miserably. Finally, after too many wars and too much lost treasure of precious lives, the Elders of all the tribes of Israel recognized that David had, all along, been more of a King than Saul ever was. Even the northern Kingdom, Saul’s party, came around, acknowledging that ‘for some time, while Saul was King over us, it was *you* who led out Israel and brought it in’.

The Elders do what seems to be in such short supply these days. They admit the errors of their ways. They admit that the leader they had blindly followed with idol like loyalty had betrayed his calling and, as a result, betrayed the people he was called to serve.

“So, all the Elders came to Hebron to make David king over Israel.”

From some of the studying I did on this text, it seems that the word ‘king’ in this line might be somewhat inaccurate. A more accurate translation might be something like ‘Prince’. In other words, as the Elders make David King, they put David on notice that his coronation is not a blank check. There will be parameters within which he must operate, which they will be keeping a keen eye on. They had learned their lesson from Saul’s failure. David will be Prince and God will remain the Sovereign King of Israel.

In the context of ancient Israel, it’s important to recognize that it’s impossible to separate Israel as a religious community and Israel as a state. This is a far cry from our current reality where we struggle to maintain a safe and healthy distance between religious faith and affairs of state. This effort came about as the result of the lessons history taught. As with all things human, we have a gift of ruining even the best of things, even religion. History has shown just how quickly even the church can be corrupted by power, easily shifting it from the persecuted to the persecutor. We have seen things of faith used by a state to reject, exclude, harm, torment, and oppress those who do not swear allegiance to the religious party line of the day. We have seen the worst of what can

happen when a particular brand of faith becomes a state's litmus test of what is right. We have even seen the worst of religious extremism today, modelling societal structures around abusive and oppressive religious tenants. All too easily, such things can subtly creep up on us, suddenly snapping shut and capturing us in their prison.

It scared the forefathers of our nation enough that they did the best they could to build into our constitution safeguards against it. It scares us enough, that it rightfully makes us nervous when we smell the scent of such dangers.

Even so, separating matters of state from things of faith is very difficult. Personally, I cannot separate my faith from my being any more than I can separate my brain from thinking.

What made David a unique and rare leader was that his heart never lost its passion for God. He was not perfect. Far from it! A fact made evident even in today's passage as it details David's conquest of Jerusalem. None the less, David did a lot of good and there is a reason why David is seen, even today, as a quintessential leader.

The vocation David was called to was to be a Shepherd King. David never strayed far from that vocation, even when he felled the giant Goliath.

A Shepherd lives and works among the sheep. A shepherd protects the sheep. A shepherd minds the wounds of the vulnerable sheep. A shepherd never loses sight of his vocation to watch out for the sheep's well-being – ensuring they are fed, watered, and sheltered. A shepherd never loses touch with the sheep.

I wonder how well this value is maintained today among those whom we call upon to lead us? Presidents are whisked away and secluded within the fortress of a White House. Equally, a fortress of wealth, a kind of wealth few of us are able to relate to, seems to often be the pre-requisite for those who secure a place in government.

The ease with which leaders can be lulled into forgetting what it's like to live life in the trenches, where most of us live, is frightening. The effortlessness with which our leaders make threats of war while forgetting the mothers and fathers who are worried sick about sons and daughters in

harm's way seems sinful. The lack of holy imagination that requires dialogue, compromise, and humility for the sake of those caught in the middle of partisan battles, seems to have been jettisoned.

The Shepherd King David never forgot the roots of what makes a Shepherd and that is to be connected and bonded with the sheep.

Covenant, promise, unshakable loyalty to the visions set before David by God were always at the forefront of David. Did David always do a good job at seeing and adhering to them? Absolutely not! But when he stepped outside those boundaries, set by the Elders when they anointed him, the Elders spoke up.

Equally important was the fact that David possessed the kind of humility a Shepherd King requires. He listened, took their warnings seriously, admitted his faults, and set a new course. Perhaps, this was most aptly demonstrated in the Prophet Nathan's confrontation of David after David had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed.

As Elders of today, we have a responsibility to speak up when we feel that God's vision of who are to be, is being betrayed. As with Paul, the author of Romans 13, being submissive to the powers that be, does not mean being silent or being bullied into silence. It is incumbent upon us to be the conscience of today that bravely speaks up when boundaries of what is good and right and holy are breached.

David was called to be a Shepherd King. Jesus, the Gospels tell us, is the Good Shepherd who, in ways far more perfect than David ever mustered, shows us what the vision of God's Kingdom truly looks like.

When governmental laws, structures, and mindset betray the parameters set by the Good Shepherd, silence is not an option. And, to be sure, silence is not the same thing as submissiveness to governing authorities. Perhaps this is best demonstrated by way of the non-violent resistance that was advocated by leaders like Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Equally important is the need for humility among those who lead, requiring them to make a concerted effort to never be so far removed from the sheep that they cannot hear them.

I don't need to tell you, that our politics of today are in a precarious

place. It concerns me that we have become so partisan that it borders on idol worship. It concerns me how this has led to our inability to think critically and dialogue honestly. It concerns me that we have forgotten how to honor our differences for the sake of digging deeper to unearth what is truthful and faithful. It concerns me to see how we increasingly deem humility to be a weakness rather than a most treasured characteristic of true leadership.

I say all of this not as a criticism of one particular political party over against another but as a matter of concern for us all. Beloved, let us not only be good Christians but also good citizens. Our mortal history has shown us just how much damage bad leaders can inflict. It has also shown us the incredible good that good leaders can accomplish.

As elders called to bring the best out of those who lead, let us be continually cautious to not take at face value what our partisan divides tempt us to accept without thought and examination. For not only do we need Shepherd Kings like David in these precarious days but also Elders who are not afraid to speak up when the 'Davids' of our day lose sight of the God whose vision is always bigger and better than what mortal eyes alone can perceive.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.