

1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13. Context. Saul was the first of the kings of Israel. The prophet Samuel, something of a king maker, had anointed Saul at the demand of the people. But Saul's actions had displeased God and God eventually rejected him. Alternatively, it could be said that Saul simply wasn't up to the task of leading and protecting the people. This week's reading tells the story of how David came to be anointed, even while Samuel seemed unable to see what God saw, and Samuel's man Saul was still a force to be reckoned with. The main point of the passage is that God does not see as we see: God sees the heart, not just outward appearance. And the one whom God chooses to rule the entire people of Israel is the eighth and last son of a man from an obscure family.

Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel. The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Reflection. What does it mean to be spiritually blind in our own community, in our own nation? What don't we see? What are we prepared to overlook?

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Psalms 20. Context. Psalm 20 started out as a prayer of the people for their king, and serves as an appropriate "chorus" to the episode from 1 Samuel. But it is not only a prayer for the military might of their king; it is also a confession of their trust in God.

The LORD answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you! May he send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion. May he remember all your offerings, and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices. May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfill all your plans. May we shout for joy over your victory, and in the name of our God set up our banners. May the LORD fulfill all your petitions. Now I know that the LORD will help his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with mighty victories by his right hand. Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God. They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright. Give victory to the king, O LORD; answer us when we call.

Reflection. "God is on our side!" is a frequent proclamation in times of national threat and distress. We heard it over and over again from the religious cheerleaders of earlier times. But as Lincoln and others have pointed out from time to time, the question is not who's side is God on? But who's on God's side? All the military might in the world will be worth nothing without justice and peace for all of God's children. And that's what God's anointed, God's messiah, is all about.

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2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17. Context. In the first nine chapters of Paul's second letter to the Christians at Corinth, the Apostle attempted to heal the breach that had arisen between him and them over various insults and snubs that they had exchanged since his previous visit with them a couple of years before. These chapters provide him with the opportunity to heal those wounds. In the immediate context of these verses, Paul describes to them his own limitations and sufferings by way of letting them know how he is willing to suffer – joyfully -- for their sake. For Paul it is Christ's reconciling love for all that drives us and our love for Christ that transforms our relationship with Christ and with each other – transcending even whether we live or die.

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord -- for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.... For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Reflection. Paul is convinced that, despite external appearances, we are being renewed inwardly by the Spirit day by day. As we gather for worship, fellowship, service, look upon those gathered and say to yourself of each one: "there goes a beloved child of God who's on the same journey, with the same goal as myself." And when you're out and about, look upon the folks you see and say to yourself: "there go some beloved children of God; have they discovered how much God loves them?" How might that transform your relationship with others and your approach to them?

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Mark 4:26-34. Context. This week's reading gives two parables that compare the kingdom of God to the common experience of seeds. The first suggests that the kingdom grows mysteriously, in ways that we cannot control. The second, that the kingdom of God is not like human kingdoms (often portrayed as great trees) and starts from the tiniest of beginnings, providing protection for those who would take refuge there.

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Reflection. Growing God's kingdom is God's business, although we certainly have the responsibility to witness and promote it. Pheme Perkins observes (*The New Interpreters Bible*, 8.578-579) "1. The seed parables point to the certain harvest that stems from next-to-invisible beginnings. The lack of human agency during the growth process does not mean that disciples should sit back and wait for God to bring the harvest. The proverbial sayings on how faith increases warn against such a conclusion. Instead, the image of a certain harvest from invisible beginnings promises that even though our testimony to the gospel appears insignificant or even fruitless, Christians should not be discouraged or give up. Christians should beware of giving in to the mania for statistics as evidence of success, which dominates modern life. When the harvest is ripe, it will be time for the reaper. 2. The image of a mustard bush as the kingdom of God set over against the alternative vision of the nations as great trees points to another feature of God's rule. The kingdom does not replicate the kind of greatness that human nations attempt to build for themselves. 3. The passivity of human figures during the growth process challenges a common reading of these parables. They do not describe an evolutionary process by which Christians build the kingdom. The proverbial sayings warn Christians that faith cannot remain private. We must give away what we have received. This evangelical emphasis counters a common modern tendency to think of religion as a matter of private preference that is best worn lightly in the presence of others. These proverbs and parables suggest that God does not give the gift of faith (or secret of the kingdom) to individuals as their private possession. Rather, the gift provides light for others and shelter for the birds of the field." Food for thought and growth!