**Jesus Christ: our liberator from corrupting power’**

1 Samuel 8: 4-11, 16-20; Mark 3: 20-35

The problem of self-serving power

The 2018 Australian royal commission into the finance industry followed a steady stream of media reports of corporate corruption and harm to customers. Even so, the federal government had voted down calls for a royal commission 26 times. It seemed like the demands for better governance in Australia’s financial services sector had fallen on deaf ears.

A similar problem of corrupt governance is at the heart of today’s reading from 1 Samuel. Samuel is the high priest and a leader in Israel, but he is getting older. Further, his two sons and potential successors take bribes and pervert justice to serve their own ends. So ‘all the elders of Israel … came to Samuel …and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us … a king to govern us, like other nations”’ (8:4-5).  The elders’ request for Samuel to appoint a king is due to the total inadequacy of the current leadership to provide good governance for the nation. The call from the Australian community for a royal commission had a similar concern. People had lost confidence in the government’s ability to look into the deep-seated injustice and corruption in the finance industry. So a royal commission was eventually called to get to the bottom of things.

The terms of reference were drawn up by the Coalition government, signed by the Governor-General, and issued under the seal of the monarch (and I quote) ‘Queen Elizabeth II, by the grace of God Queen of Australia’. Now while the Commission letterhead clearly states that the whole of the Queen’s reign is under God’s governance, there is no further reference to God’s governance of Australia. Instead, the government focussed on the legal misconduct of individuals and systems. There was no focus on God’s justice. This ensured the Commission would not recommend any changes that would limit corporations’ competitiveness or profit-making, or upset the stability of the Australian financial system generally. The Queen’s Commission had affirmed the priority of God’s governance in national life, so why were the needs of the economy given priority over God’s

justice in the Royal Commission?

The book of Samuel shows that hanging onto power removes attention to God’s vision for justice. Samuel did not want to give away his power to a king to take over governing the country. In the same way, our government didn’t want a Royal Commission telling them there were problems in the finance industry that the government was failing to address. So when it comes to conflicts over personal power, seemingly the claims of God’s justice are the first to be ignored. God says, ‘they have rejected me from being king over them’ (8:7). Those in power do not want to be accountable to God’s governance. And as the book of Samuel records and as we are learning at our cost, the rejection of God’s good governance has bitter consequences.

The bitter consequences of corrupted power

God warns the elders of all the problems that will befall Israel because they insist on having a king like all the other nations. These bitter consequences include conscripting young men to raise an army and co-opting them into defence armaments manufacturing, siphoning off wealth to the king’s family and friends, taxing productive industry for personal gain, and enforcing labour laws that reduce the population to slave-like working conditions. Having a king to solve their problem of unjust government will be a recipe for more of the same, if not worse, because the nation will have shut out God and then forgotten God’s intention for justice on earth. ‘In that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day’ (8:18). Today, the self-serving priorities of dictators and nations holding onto power to sustain their economic growth are delivering a bitter fruit.

The path of giving priority to the needs of the global economy over human wellbeing leads us straight to this global pandemic and Covid-19. Ecologists have presented the science that reveals how unbridled economic expansion has caused viruses to escape the animal kingdom and find hosts in humans. Now nations and corporations that have put the importance of self-aggrandising power and economic growth above justice have created an equality of death and suffering amongst the nations of the world. The judgement of the book of Samuel has revealed its bitter fruit to us: Australia is captive to Covid-19 like the other nations of our world. The world seems as one in its captivity to unbridled and unthinking economic growth, yet with each new lockdown, the rush to get back to ‘normal’ with so little reflection on the nature of our captivity, is depressing.

Jesus’ healing grace robs sin and evil of its power

Yet Jesus looks at a similar circumstance for his people living under the weight of foreign occupation by the Roman Empire. Mark’s gospel reports people in countless numbers are sick and tired of the foreign occupation and have come to Jesus for healing. This puts Jesus in trouble with the Jewish religious leaders, who have sent their big guns ‘down from Jerusalem’ (3: 22) because they are worried Jesus will upset their peace-deal with the Roman authorities. These leaders accuse Jesus of healing people through the power of Beezlebub, saying that Jesus casts out demons through ‘the ruler of the demons’ (3:22). But Jesus scorns their accusation, saying ‘How can Satan cast out Satan?’ (3:23). It is likely that ‘Satan’ here is code for the Roman Empire, the demonic source of Israelite suffering and injustice.

Then Jesus says: ‘But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered’ (3:27). Jesus is saying Satan is the strong man, and he has tied him up and is already healing the harm done by the violence of Rome. Jesus bases his claim against the satanic Empire on the following facts: ‘If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand’ (3:24-25).  Jesus is healing people who have been sold out by Rome’s puppet ruler of their kingdom, Herod. Even more to the point, Jesus is healing those who have been sold out by the house of religious leaders who have been complicit in maintaining their privileges by accommodating the Romans. The conclusion that Jesus is healing and liberating people of the sickness caused by Rome’s power to sow division amongst the kingdoms and houses of its Empire is obvious: ‘And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come’ (3:26).  But not everyone is open to hearing this good news.

Jesus has saved us from captivity to the strong man politics of economic growth, but like the scribes and elders, our church is a house divided that has rejected God’s justice and salvation. When the Royal Commission began to uncover the corruption in Australian finance corporations, our Synod’s Funds Management – now called U Ethical, invited all its account holders to a briefing meeting about how Funds Management was responding to the Commission’s findings of greed. Half of the dozen or so in attendance to learn what a Uniting Church agency was doing about this national ethical scandal involving Australia’s largest corporations were Funds Management staff. There were two church treasurers, one other minister besides me, and a consumer advocate for a Unitingcare agency. There was no-one from the Theological College, no-one from the Justice unit, and no-one from the Commission for Mission. In this microcosm, we may see the grim reality of a house divided: the people who guide the Church in faith and ethics seemed to show no interest in the national scandal of financial abuse and greed. The people who steward the Church’s finances and make a just profit for the Church shone an ethical light on a national injustice and abuse in their own industry, yet no-one in the missional life of the Church appeared interested.

Christ’s healing power transforms every sphere of life, welcoming all who do God’s will

So Jesus puts his finger on our problem, saying ‘whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’ (3:29). Our eternal sin is not only that today’s church has withdrawn the place of faith from the world of work. Our problem is that for too long, the church has believed the world of work is unclean, corrupted. As the scribes accused Jesus, saying of his healing ministry, ‘He has an unclean spirit’ (3:29), so the Church has dismissed as unclean or second-class, those who labour in the world of paid work, even when they bring a spirit of ethical and just behaviour to their service for others.

From here we can grasp the point of Jesus argument with those who try to narrow

the circle of his followers to those who claim they have a special relationship with him. Jesus breaks through the narrow circle of those who claim they are superior because of their knowledge, saying, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother”’(3:33-35). In a house divided, unity invites us to open our hearts to the new family of Christ, namely those who live out a justice ethic that manifests the will of God. This year I have been working with your minister, Brendan, to engage our Theological College in working with the Finance Sector Union to develop a program in professional ethics for finance sector workers. We are also seeking to engage with U Ethical in informing church members on how to support ethical investment in the business world. You are called to open your hearts to join with all those who live out a justice ethic that manifests the will of God. This is the unity our divided world needs to know through the power of Christ’s healing Spirit. The strong man of unrestrained growth has been bound up. And we are called into new conversations with whoever is doing God’s will for justice. Open your hearts in prayer and love for this urgent and vital ministry.

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