

1 Sam 15:34 – 16:13

2 Cor 5: 6-10, 14-17

Mark 4: 26-34

Last week I spent a couple of days puppy-sitting.

It turns out that a puppy is completely without discrimination.

Going for a walk on Hampstead Heath – every person, every dog, was eligible to be her new best friend.

That guy in the hoodie with a Staffordshire Bull terrier – I'd have given him a wide berth.

But no – the puppy was right in there, tail wagging, inviting the Staffie to play.

She turned out to be called Poppy, and was the sweetest dog you could imagine.

Or that woman in lycra, jogging past with a greyhound and a pedometer app open on her smartphone – she'll be far too busy.

But no – 'Oh she's too cute! What's her name? Can I take her home...'

I suspect God is a bit like a puppy.

Completely indiscriminate in loving everyone.

No taste at all.

No pre-judging.

Inviting anyone and everyone to join in the game.

Puppy-sitting gives you an insight into what the Bible means when it says God is love.

And it's rather more full-on than I thought.

Today's Bible readings invite us to look at the world with a different perspective.

God's perspective.

As the writer of the book of Samuel explains to his readers, *the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.*

The key word in this chapter is the Hebrew *ra'â* .

Ra'â means to see, to look, to perceive, to discern, to choose.

A whole range of meanings, in fact, linked by what we see, how we interpret what we see, and how we respond.

At the beginning of chapter 16 the Lord tells Samuel to stop looking back and grieving over Saul, the king he chose for the people, and who has proved not to be able to lead the people in God's way.

Unlike Samuel, God is not stuck in the past, brooding over the things that didn't work out.

God is not dwelling on the might-have-been.

God is moving on to the future.
And he has *provided* a new king.
The verb is *ra'â*.

Saul was chosen because he was the handsomest man in all Israel, head and shoulders taller than everyone else.
He was the film star king.
The one who looked the part.

When it comes to the new king, God has seen – not what he looks like, but what he is really like.
He has seen and discerned his potential.
He has chosen him.
He has provided him for the people.

And so we come to that familiar story of all the good-looking sons of Jesse being rejected, one by one, until the last, the least, the shepherd boy is summoned...
David, not named until the very last verse of the passage – David the underdog – is to become David, the iconic king of Israel, the saviour of his country.
Like Cinderella, like Jack and the bean-stalk, like Dick Whittington, the unlikely, ignored, unknown turns out to be the star of the show.

This story puts us in touch with one of the key themes of the Bible.
It's about keeping our eyes open to the unexpected potential of the outsider.

Since before the election there have been a whole series of posters on the underground.
You've probably seen them.
Each one is headed *I am an immigrant*.

I am an immigrant
For seven years I have been saving lives
Your life could be saved next
Lukas Belina
Poland
Firefighter

I am an immigrant
For thirteen years I have been championing human rights and fighting for justice
S Chelvan
Sri Lanka
Barrister

The crowd-funded *Movement against Xenophobia* wanted to make a point with these posters.

Immigrants are not simply a drain on our resources.

They are not just the guys who sleep on our church steps, the hundreds that are crossing into Turkey from Syria this week to escape the fighting, the thousands being pulled from the waters of the Mediterranean, provoking arguments amongst European community about who should fund their rescue.

Or about whether the boats should be paid to turn back.

Immigrants bring skills and ability and talent to the countries where they settle.

Who knows the potential in each person looking for a new life in a new place?

Those of us who judge by appearance are not judging by God's standards.

God sees the potential in every outsider.

We live in a culture which places a high value on what things and people look like.

Our TV screens are full of ads for hair dye, makeup, clothes, cars, smartphones – all the things that pronounce *I am a success*.

Admire me.

Approve of me.

Love me.

It's all too easy to buy into that culture.

Either by caring too much ourselves about what we wear or how we look;

Or by evaluating others in the same way.

As Paul points out in his second letter to the Corinthians, we are too at home in the body.

Too at home in this world, this culture, this set of assumptions.

We get too comfortable here.

Just as the exiles got too comfortable in Babylon.

Forgot their true home.

Forgot God.

Samuel has to re-learn something he has forgotten, because he got too comfortable in his culture.

At the very beginning of Samuel's story, it was Eli, the old priest, who could not see - *ra'â* – and the boy Samuel who heard the voice of God clearly, even though he had to be taught what it might mean.

Now it is Samuel who does not see clearly.

In last week's lectionary reading the people of Israel wanted a king.

They wanted to be like other nations.

They wanted someone to do their fighting for them.

They wanted someone to blame when things went wrong.
Samuel warned them of what we all know – that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.
But no – they want a king.
So Samuel finds them a king.
And Samuel has become so at home in their mind-set that he finds them a king who fits all their preconceptions.
Saul.
Tall, good-looking, battle-ready.

Now he has to choose again.
And God wants him to learn to look differently.
Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature.
The verb here is *nabat* – look – rather than *ra'â* – see.
Samuel looks but he does not see.
He must learn not to be fooled by appearances.
He must learn to look – see – discern – perceive – choose by different criteria.
God's criteria.

Back again, to one of the key themes of the Bible.
Grace in unexpected places, unexpected people.
David was in so many ways an unlikely choice.
The youngest and least important of eight sons.
From a rather undistinguished family.
Jesse's grandmother was Ruth, the impoverished immigrant from Moab, who got to marry Boaz by rather questionable tactics.
Not the stuff of royalty by the world's usual standards.
Just as you wouldn't expect a Messiah to be born to an unmarried, homeless couple, who become refugees in Egypt.

We are used to thinking that our call is to help the voiceless, the marginalised, the lost.
Of course.
It's our Christian duty.
That's how you know you are a sheep rather than a goat.
But this story asks us to do something different.
To imagine that God can work through the voiceless, the marginalised, the lost, to bless us.

At the Hugh Price Hughes lecture on Tuesday Jon told the story of Terry, a guy with problems of multiple addiction, who found his way to the church Jon used to attend. He started coming along because a group of church volunteers had gone to decorate his flat – which badly needed it!

He was a disruptive presence in services, often interrupting tranquil prayer time with his demands for attention, and his accusations against God and smug Christians.

Gradually he became a friend, a part of the congregation; he came to believe that he belonged.

When we got to the questions at the end of the lecture, Steve asked a very good one.

We've heard what the church did for Terry, he said.

What did Terry do for the church?

He kept us real, said Jon.

He was a visible embodiment of the stuff we read and the stuff we sing.

He was the presence of God.

As so often, I'm tempted to end there.

The shepherd who becomes king.

The outsider who embodies God's grace.

The obscure mustard seed which grows to become the tree which gives shade and shelter to all the birds of the air.

But I think there is more to this story than that.

The story invites us to identify with Samuel.

To learn to see - *ra'â* – with God's eyes.

Not to get too comfortable with the world's way of seeing.

To learn to love as God loves.

Not to ration our love to those who appear worthy.

To recognise that God chooses the most unlikely people to be channels of grace.

But the story also invites us to identify with David.

And I think that can be much harder.

Can we believe that God can find possibilities for grace in us?

I think the story of David gives us hope that we too can be chosen.

David was an uncertain choice for the ruler of Israel.

But if we were to continue in the tradition of Cinderella, Jack and the bean-stalk, or Dick Whittington, we would expect a happy ending.

The humble shepherd boy who becomes king, and lives happily ever after.

But that's not exactly how the Bible tells it.

As we follow David's story over the coming weeks of ordinary time, we will discover that though he did become that iconic king of Israel, his life was a very ordinary one in many ways.

Ordinary because he makes mistakes.

He struggles with divided loyalties.

He allows his desire for a woman – or is it his desire for power? – to overrule what he knows to be right.

David is not idealised by these writers.

Like Samuel, like all of us, he is ordinary because he struggles with seeing rightly.

He gets too comfortable with the world of battles and fighting and might is right.

But God is still with him.

God can still use him to be the channel of hope for his people's future.

The moment when David is named in today's story, is the moment when Samuel anointed him.

And the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

David stands in a long line of unexpected, flawed people chosen by God, and given the power of the spirit to get on with their task.

Samuel is the same: he is not exactly a role model for prophetic behaviour.

He has to be roused out of a grief which has completely immobilised him.

He is afraid of the consequences of publicly anointing a new king while Saul is still in power, and looks to God for a stratagem to avoid confrontation.

He rushes into judgement using all the wrong criteria.

But he is still chosen by God for the task of recognising and anointing David.

Just as David, despite his faults, is chosen to be king.

What we find so hard to accept, is that we are loved and chosen, not because we are perfect, but because that is God's nature.

The love of Christ urges us on... Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians,

...because we are convinced that one has died for all...

From now on, therefore, we regard no-one from a human point of view.

We have value – I have value – because Christ died for me.

And that applies to everyone.

Each person has value, because Christ died for all.

God's unconditional love – God's puppyish enthusiasm for each member of the human race – is not a soft option.

Despite my puppy story, salvation is not an Andrex advert.

It's not that God doesn't care that David behaves selfishly, that others suffer as a result of his unrestrained ego.

God tells it like it is.

David goes on learning throughout his life – making mistakes, facing the consequences, repenting – often literally – in sackcloth and ashes.

But he keeps going with the task he has been given.

And God does not withdraw his spirit, the spirit with which he was anointed that first day when Samuel learned not to judge with human eyes.

God will provide the resources we need to be who we are called to be.

This is what Paul wants the Corinthians to learn.

Just as he himself learned.

He began with a neat set of rules, a Pharisee of Pharisees.

Those who broke the rules – those who signed up to this new Jesus cult – were clearly wrong.

Paul's life was dedicated to rooting them out, getting rid of them.

What he learns in that odd encounter on the Damascus Road is to see differently.

And he learns it through losing his sight altogether for a while.

He learns that God longs to include, not to exclude.

That God longs to offer every person the opportunity to develop their potential.

So 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 Kingdom of God is not the seed, not even the farmer – the kingdom is the act of scattering.

And God is always scattering.

The problem is we are always running around tidying up after God.

The seeds are in the wrong place.

They are the wrong kind of plant.

The harvest is due at the wrong time.

But God is extravagant.

God sees the potential for growth in every seed.

And we can see signs of the Kingdom flourishing everywhere.

If we can only look with God's eyes.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

A small, insignificant, ordinary, common-or-garden seed.

It springs up everywhere.

It grows into a shrub, a bush.

This parable is based on a story which has been used and adapted by all three of the synoptic Gospel writers.

But Matthew and Luke are so embarrassed by the idea of the Kingdom of God being like an ordinary shrub, that they change the word to a *tree*.

After all, there are plenty of images in the Old Testament of the people of Israel being like a tree.

Ideally a magnificent cedar of Lebanon.

Or a fruitful Olive.

You can see the point of those trees.

But Mark asks us to see differently.

God's Kingdom isn't huge and obvious.

It doesn't conform to our preconceptions of size and magnificence.

At Helen's class meeting on Thursday, we were talking about the Easter message of resurrection.

What did it mean to those first disciples?

What does it mean to us today?

What might resurrection look like in a church like Hinde Street?

I think it might look like a mustard seed, scattered by chance.

Not what we might expect.

Not what we planned.

It's as common as a weed.

It's as ordinary as a shrub.

It grows everywhere.

It offers shade and shelter to all the birds of the air.

It models the radical inclusion of the Kingdom of God.

All we need to do is open our eyes and look.