**Sermon by Stephen Linton**

**13.06.2021**

**God of the Unexpected**

1 Sam 16: 1 – 13; Psalm 20; Mark 4: 26 – 34

As most of you know, I’m a Licensed Lay Minister, what we used to call a Reader, at St Peter’s Church. Now usually at St Peter’s we plan on our preaching rotas to study a particular book of the Bible, or sometimes a series of related topics. So we tend to know what we are supposed to be preaching about. Whereas I think here at St Mark’s you mostly use what’s known as the Lectionary, the set readings for each Sunday on a 3-yearly cycle.

It seems to me that the challenge of that is that each week you come to a set of readings that may at first sight seem unconnected. And so sometimes the preacher selects one of those to base his or her sermon on. But if possible I think it’s good to look for a theme running through the readings set for that day. So what might that be in today’s readings?

We first read from 1 Samuel 16, the story of the anointing of David as King. But there was already a king in Israel, king Saul, so the prophet Samuel had to be careful to avoid any publicity which would have aroused Saul’s suspicions of a rival claimant to the throne. But despite the risks, he had clearly been told by God to go and seek out one of Jesse’s sons to be anointed as God’s choice to succeed Saul. So Samuel arrived for what he advertised as a low-key religious event, a family sacrifice, and asked Jesse to bring his sons along. And the oldest son is a fine fellow, and to Samuel looks the part, but God says ‘no, not him’. Similarly with the 2nd, 3rd and the others down to the 7th. And God kept saying ‘no’. So Samuel asked, ‘Do you have any other sons’, and Jesse replied, ‘only the youngest, the least significant one, who we didn’t allow to come to the sacrifice. He’s out looking after the sheep’. So David was summoned and God said ‘this is the one’. And Samuel anointed David as the next king of Israel, though there was to be a long period before David finally came to the throne.

So what do we see here in this reading? Yes, we see God in control, choosing the one he wishes to be king; and yes, we see God guiding Samuel as to his choice. But I think most notably we see God doing the unexpected thing. Choosing the least, the youngest, the one not considered worthy of coming to the sacrifice, the one left looking after the sheep. God doing the unexpected thing.

The second reading set for today is Psalm 20, which we didn’t read. It’s a psalm expressing confidence in God. And verse 7 goes like this: ‘Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God’. In defending the country from their enemies, the psalmist implies that the natural way to do that would be to have a strong army, with plenty of chariots and horses. But, he writes, better still is to trust in God. God who acts in unexpected ways, and who doesn’t necessarily go along with human logic: the obvious choice of Jesse’s eldest son; the obvious advantage of having a powerful army. No, our God is the God of the unexpected.

And our Gospel reading from St Mark ch 4 supports that theme of the unexpected way that God works. We read two parables told by Jesus, which both refer to examples of everyday things that happen on the farm. In the first Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like the seeds that the farmer scatters, and then leaves nature to do its work. The seeds sprout and grow, and how that happens isn’t fully understood by the farmer. He goes along with his normal routine and whether he’s out in the fields or in bed the natural process of growth continues. And, says Jesus, the Kingdom of God is like that. Now we know that when Jesus taught by parables, he was usually making a main point and not every detail is to be taken allegorically. So we don’t therefore assume that the farmer should do nothing, that he takes no care for his fields, that he doesn’t water or doesn’t prepare the ground before planting. No, the lesson here is that the kingdom of God grows because God is in charge and takes care of that growth. Not that we have no part to play, but that the growth of God’s kingdom does not depend solely on our efforts. The growth comes from God, but we, like good farmers, need to play our part too.

And in the second parable Jesus says that the smallest of seeds can grow into the largest of plants. And we know that to be true. It’s amazing how small some seeds are. Yet within that tiny seed is all the genetic information needed to produce our tomatoes or our flowers or our trees.

And again we see here the God of the unexpected. God is in charge and ultimately the growth of his kingdom depends on God, not us, and may be quite unexpected as to when and where that happens. And that growth can come from the smallest and unlikeliest of beginnings.

God chooses the youngest, the keeper of the sheep. God doesn’t depend on chariots to defend his people. God’s kingdom grows when and as where he decides.

Our God is the God of the unexpected.

Now as I have implied that doesn’t give us permission to opt out. Not at all. David’s anointing depended on Samuel doing what God told him to do, and on David accepting the role and in due course leaving the sheep to fight Goliath and on Saul’s death to become God’s anointed king.

And I don’t think the Psalm means that we should all become pacifists and abandon our defence forces. No, what the psalm says is that our trust is not in those chariots and horses, which many of us may well think that we still need as a deterrent, but that our trust should be in God.

And the parables of Jesus don’t teach that the farmer can sit back and do nothing. Other parables tell us that the farmer needs to produce good soil, removing stones and weeds, and watering when necessary. Yes, there is a role for farmers, but nonetheless the seeds grow because God has made them that way.

So we learn that our God is the God of the unexpected, and he does things in his way, sometimes despite what we do, but he still wants us to cooperate in that process. We are God’s hands and his feet in God’s world, but he will choose as and when to use us to grow his kingdom.

So what does this say to you, the people of St Mark’s Church, and the those of us who normally go to St Peter’s? It tells us that God is in charge. It tells us that God is the God of the unexpected. It tells us that we need, like Samuel, to find out what God is doing and then be ready for him to use us in the growth of his kingdom.

And for both of our churches that means seeking God’s way forward. Most obviously for yourselves with a new Vicar and with new people joining from St Peter’s as is envisaged, not just to swell your numbers but to help you to grow God’s kingdom here in this parish. But also for us at St Peter’s, who may find talented people moving away to join you.

So we both need to be waiting on our unexpected God to see how he leads us into the future. Ready like Samuel to take risks. Ready like David to accept the role that God has for us. Ready like the Psalmist to trust in God, even when circumstances may seem overwhelming. Ready like the farmer to do what we should in facilitating the growth of the seed. Ready to expect and accept the unexpected.

And we note that it was the youngest, least significant son who was anointed by Samuel to be king. And it was the smallest of seeds that grew into the great tree. God can use what is humanly speaking the most unlikely person, the most unlikely circumstances, the most unlikely contacts, the most unlikely friendships: yes, God can use even you and me, to grow his kingdom.

What is required of us is to trust in him What is required of us is to be ready and willing for him to use us where and when he wishes.

Let’s pray. Father, this is an exciting but challenging time for our churches. So thank you that we can trust in you, our unexpected God. Will you guide and encourage us to serve you when and where you want us. May your kingdom come, your will be done in our two churches and in our own lives. And give us the peace that we need as we wait to see what you are going to do here at St Mark’s. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.