

## SERMON 19 Jul 2007 Elizabeth Richardson

King David was far from being the simple shepherd that he was when he killed Goliath. He was a complex man with complex reasons for wanting to do things. He had taken over the kingdom that Saul had developed and gone on from there. He had acquired the southern kingdom of Judah and taken its stronghold, Jerusalem, to be his new capital.

None of this was achieved without fighting and there were more battles to come. Even so, David had been able to build a luxury home for himself in Jerusalem. It was built of cedar, a valuable timber. Then he thought to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant. Until then the Ark had moved from place to place. It and its tent had moved with the Israelites in the desert. Later it seems to have been near Bethel and it had spent time in Shiloh. It was even captured by the Philistines for a period.

The Ark was a wooden chest, decorated with gold, which contained the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments had been given to Moses. Now, as we heard last week, it was brought to Jerusalem amidst much fanfare. David made sure that the people saw and understood the importance of having the sacred Ark in the new capital. It was housed in a tent. Like Bedouin tents, tents of those days were substantial but nevertheless tents. They could be dismantled and moved. So David decided to build a house for the Ark. If he could have a luxury house, why shouldn't the Ark also? Perhaps he felt that it was not right that he should be better housed than God's Ark.

Of course, there was also a political advantage in having it in a permanent building. A temple was a symbol to the people that this was the seat of government. It was normal in those days for rulers of countries in that region to build a temple. It also meant that God would have a permanent residence. In a way, it could be said that David wanted to control God by restricting God to that one place in Jerusalem. Until then, God had been the one to guide David. And it would be a tremendous boost to David's, already healthy, sense of importance.

So we can't be surprised that God said no to a luxury temple. God would not be pinned down to one place, nor would God do what a mere mortal wanted. God was able to be with his people wherever they were. in the same way that Jesus moved around the country and healed and taught people in each place.

God said no to a special temple or house for himself and the Ark but countered with a promise. David would have many descendants over many generations. God used a word play that works in the same way in English. House. David had wanted to build a house for the Ark and God. God countered with the promise of a House of David, a dynasty of David. God would say when it was time to build a temple and who could build it. David's son, Solomon, would be given permission at a later time.

How often do we want to have dealings with God on our terms not God's? We want what makes us feel good, not what we know that God wants. Some of you may have heard the Radio National program Encounter last Sunday. One of the speakers was Michael Northcott, Prof of Ethics at Edinburgh University, talking about the ethics and theology of climate change. In it he said that the Old Testament understanding of justice could be put in these terms: How do you know if a country is just? – You know when you see how

the poor are doing. The Old Testament prophets understood a clear link between ecological destruction and justice. There are always some people wanting to use the earth to their own short-term advantage without thinking of all of God's people. In Old Testament times many of the forests of the eastern Mediterranean were cut down. Some people realised at the time that it was causing problems but powerful vested interests insisted. Isn't it always the same?

In Northcott's view, the developed world is becoming increasingly unjust because the poor are becoming poorer. Even more, in this global world, our neighbours are no longer simply the people who live nearby. Our neighbours are also the poor farmers in Africa or people in Bangladesh who are suffering because of our actions. The developed world's increased output of carbon dioxide is resulting in less food production in Africa. We have contributed to the warming of the seas leading to increased storms in vulnerable parts.

Of course, it takes more than individuals to fix the problems. There needs to be structural change at the level of whole countries and between countries. But that starts with each person confessing that the way we are living is morally wrong NOW. Then there can be sufficient pressure on governments to make the changes. To plan now for the near future when oil supplies globally will reduce. To plan now for changes in food distribution.

Change can start in small ways. This month, the small highlands town of Bundanoon has made world wide news by voting to stop selling bottled water. The idea came when a company wanted to set up a water bottling facility in their area. They were suddenly confronted with the harm that would do to their environment and the huge costs involved in bottling water. It was a moral issue and they took a stand. In the short term, shopkeepers will lose money on the lost sales but they believed that it was the morally right long term decision.

Northcott referred to the theologian Karl Barth who said that we have put ourselves in the place of God and that is wrong. Ultimately the earth, God's creation, will punish us. Take one example. It is known that old growth forests are involved in the production of rain and yet we cut them down. Of course the earth will react – there will be less rain just as there has been in so many places in the past.

Northcott believes that it is only because the climate has been so stable over the past 10,000 years that we have Christianity at all. It is only in the last 10,000 years that civilizations have developed with agriculture and the ability to record ideas and pass them on to future generations. Over that time the climate has had minor fluctuations in temperature of no more than 0.5%. The medieval warming in Europe was in fact only between 0.25% and 0.3% and yet that was sufficient to allow for increased food production and greater wealth. The wealth was used for the glory of God in the building of the great cathedrals. In the past 100 years we've had between 0.5% and 0.6% increase and we are looking at around 3% -4% world wide. In some places it will be more. That would make life exceedingly difficult. The rate of increase of temperature is more than ever before in the period of settled civilization.

What are we as Christians doing about it? Are we prepared to look hard at the best available evidence? Are we prepared to lobby for the long term good of God's people on earth? Are we prepared to work for the good of people

today living in the poorest countries? Are we prepared to accept that God's creation is valuable and that we have a responsibility to it? OR are we trying to say that we know better than God? Are we saying that we think it is not proven and in any case we don't want our comfortable life style to change?

When King David wanted to call the shots, God said no. We too need to listen to God. Certainly some of us have listened and are concerned and have tried to take action. It is so very frustrating. Noah listened to God but was unable to convince others of the urgency of the message. In the end, all Noah could do was to take action for himself and his family and the animals. If we can't convince others of the urgency of the message, all we too can do is take action in our small ways – just like Bundanoon. Determined action in many small ways can lead to big changes.

Where something is within our ability to take a stand on a moral issue then we must as Christians. We must think of our neighbours with love and do whatever is right by them, as much as we are able.

If you read on from this mornings reading in 2 Samuel, you will see in the following verses where God is talking of David's son: "When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you." God made an unconditional promise to love his people. That didn't prevent God from being upset or cross with his people but God would not withdraw love.

When we have that promise of unconditional love from God, can we do less than respond with love and honour? We honour God not by telling God what we want but by doing God's will, by loving and looking after our neighbours worldwide and the whole of creation.

Amen.