

The freedom to enslave ourselves

There's a debate going on in our Old Testament reading. At one level it's between Samuel and God on one side and the elders of Israel on the other. The elders think of themselves as progressive: they want to be like the nations around them, unified under a king, who will *fight their battles*: provide them with the security they think they need to prosper. Samuel represents the voice of tradition, in which Israel was a union of tribes who found their unity and security in the God who'd brought them into the land; and who raised up judges to defend them against their enemies. At a deeper level, Jewish scripture is debating the institution of the monarchy in the history of Israel: was it a good thing? Was it God's will?

This narrative answers each of these questions with a firm 'No'. I remember learning about the Tudors and Stuarts more than once in primary school: that meant a lot about kings and queens. There's a lot about kings in the books of 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings: the powerful attract historical attention. Yet God, through Samuel, draws attention to the underbelly of this political system: the king who fights your battles will draw his army from your families; the centralisation of power will require the diversion and taxation of local resources. The end result? *You shall be his slaves*.

That reference to slavery is a weighty one. Not because slavery was thought of as wrong at that time – I note that the elders themselves possess male and female slaves. But Israelites were not meant to be slaves. Indeed, God had formed them as his people by bringing them out of slavery to the king of Egypt. Yet here they are voluntarily enslaving themselves again. And seeking their security, not in the God who'd proved that he had their welfare at heart, but by granting power to a fallible human being.

Yet it seems that the freedom God gives his people includes the freedom to reject him; as well as the freedom to make poor political decisions. The people were determined to have a king and God let them have their way. But they will have to live with the consequences. Immortalised in scripture, the voice of Samuel sounds to future generations: *Don't say I didn't warn you!* And the voice of the Lord adds, *Don't come crying to me!* The verdict of scripture is that the monarchy did let the people down: undermining their relationship with God and ending in defeat and exile. Yet the monarchy happened – and God, as we shall hear, tried to work with it. And ultimately, although God's people had rejected him, God didn't reject them.

We also see the freedom to deny God played out in the gospels, ending with Christ on a cross. Again, God doesn't reject his people; indeed, St. Paul writes often in his letters of the freedom we have in Christ – freed from slavery to sin. Yet his letters also witness to the ability of Christians voluntarily to enslave themselves again – not, like their Jewish ancestors here, to a political system, but morally. Rather than abandoning the God who bought us our freedom, we should rather live, he says, as *slaves to righteousness*.

Scholars debate whether this criticism of monarchy in 1 Samuel 8 was something which could have been put forward at the time, using evidence of exploitation from the nations around; or whether it was written retrospectively, relating Israel's actual experience of its kings. A similar passage in Deuteronomy seems to make pointed reference to the activities of Solomon, although it purports to predate him. When we make political choices, such as Brexit or the Scottish demand for independence, the will of God may be harder to discern at the time; or even with the benefit of hindsight. It's worth asking what the underbelly of any proposal looks like: who might have to meet the cost? And whether freedom from one form of control may result in enslavement to another? Yet whatever the will of the people, or the shortcomings of its leaders, God is willing to work with the result.

Drawing on St. Paul, it's also worth asking whether any personal choices we have made in our own lives have resulted in our enslavement? And whether any of these choices have led us away from God?

