

Lesson 12: The Rise of King David (1 Samuel 16 – 2 Samuel 6)

David's Anointing

Having declared His intention to replace Saul's rule with that of someone more worthy, God sends Samuel to the house of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, to find the next king from among Jesse's sons. It is worthwhile to point out that Jesse is of the tribe of Judah, which recalls the passage from Genesis: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs" (49:10). Royalty shall always be associated with the tribe of Judah, even until that line is fulfilled in the King of Kings, Christ, who is born in Bethlehem, from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1), among the tribe of Judah.

Samuel tells Jesse to send for his sons, that the Lord may choose one of them to be made king. Seven sons present themselves, yet none are elected, so they send for the youngest, David, who is tending the sheep. Upon his arrival, God says to Samuel, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.' This passage is a marvelous foreshadowing of the sacrament of confirmation: the young David is anointed with oil in anticipation of his great mission in the service of Yahweh, and the Holy Spirit comes upon him, that he might be given the strength to do all that lies before him. So too in the sacrament of confirmation, the young Catholic is anointed with oil and the gift of the Holy Spirit to prepare him to be an active disciple of Christ.

So now David is in line for the throne; however, Saul is still king, and it will be over a decade before David begins his reign. So he is patient, and waits for the Lord to make His will apparent in his life. This is the feature of David's character that contrasts so strongly with Saul: whereas Saul takes matters into his own hands and rushes ahead, David is docile to divine providence and is careful to "wait for the Lord" (Ps. 27:14). Saul depends on himself and treats God as a bystander; David is humble, completely surrendered to God's will. Not ambitious to achieve things for himself, he is abandoned to be only a servant of Yahweh, and this abandonment is a source of great peace. For Saul, on the other hand, his reliance on himself has had the same result to which all forms of prideful self-sufficiency inevitably lead: fear, anxiety and a lack of peace. Once Saul defied the Lord through pride and disobedience the Holy Spirit left him, and has been replaced with an evil spirit that torments him. This is a powerful illustration that mortal sin deprives us of the Holy Spirit.

David and Goliath

Because of this evil spirit, a skilled musician is sought, in order that music might soothe Saul's suffering. One of his attendants recommends David as "skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the Lord is with him" (I Sam. 16:18). Obviously, David is already highly respected, already of great skill and virtue. He comes before Saul and wins favor with him. Not once does David plot against Saul, or betray him, or do anything but serve him humbly.

At this point we read the famous story of the combat between David and Goliath. As the Israelites and the Philistines are at war, the massive, powerful Philistine named Goliath challenges any Israelite to fight him: “If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us” (I Sam. 17:9). Needless to say, no Israelite volunteered to risk his life and his country against such an intimidating warrior. Yet upon hearing the challenge, and seeing no one rising to meet it, David himself goes before King Saul and volunteers to fight Goliath. Saul expresses his doubt: David is an inexperienced youth; Goliath is an expert and seasoned soldier. Yet David assures him: “Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God... the Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine” (I Sam. 17:36-37).

Saul agrees, and David goes to meet the heavily armed Goliath with only a slingshot. Yet he is bold. He provokes Goliath, saying, “I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord’s and he will give you into our hand.” (v. 45-47). David proceeds to hurl a stone into Goliath’s forehead, then rushes upon him and cuts off his head with Goliath’s own sword.

Note well the source of David’s courage, as well as the source of his motivational energy. Where does David get his confidence? From a complete reliance on God! Not once does he cite his own talents or intelligence, but rather recognizes all his strength as coming from Yahweh. And why does he do what he does? Is it glory, wealth, political power? Clearly not: he says the purpose of this battle is solely to spread the glory of God throughout the world and to instill in those present a confidence in Him. So too must our fortitude be based on an acknowledgment of God’s power, and our impetus grounded in a love for Him. Otherwise, if we lose sight of this source and goal, we will lose the energy and determination needed to live our lives to the fullest.

Saul Turns on David

Following his defeat of the Philistine, David is met with much public acclaim. During the rejoicing, one song is sung with the words, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” Instead of responding with gratitude for his own blessings and an appreciation of the good qualities of David, Saul becomes supremely envious. He begins to scheme how to have David killed, and becomes more and more unhappy as David continues to prosper. For his part, David treats the King with nothing but loyalty and obedience, and the Lord continues to favor him in all his undertakings (I Sam. 18:7-30). His spirit of humility and service-especially to the Lord-allows him to lead a happy and successful life, whereas Saul becomes completely consumed with his jealousy, an obsession which will continue to devour him for the rest of his life.

Before long Saul is openly seeking David's life, and David is forced to flee (I Sam. 19:1-18). Saul's pride and self-focus have led him to envy, and this envy has finally developed into a desire for the mortal sin of murder. The outcome of his egoism is thus great suffering for himself and all those around him. This is the beginning of a long series of attempts by Saul to exterminate his loyal servant, David. As his hatred progresses, we see Saul's actions become more and more maniacal. At one point he casts a spear at his own son, Jonathan, for trying to help and defend David (I Sam. 20:32-33). Some chapters later, we read that when some of the Lord's priests lend assistance to David, Saul has eighty-five of them massacred, such is his bloodthirstiness against David and anyone associated with him.

Since he bears the brunt of such horrendous injustice, we might expect David to retaliate against Saul in a bitter vengeance. Yet in fact the opposite occurs: even when events place Saul at David's mercy, David refuses to take advantage of the situation by doing him any harm. For example, it happens that while he is pursuing David to kill him, Saul goes into a cave to "relieve himself." David and his men are hiding inside the cave, and his companions encourage him to use the opportunity to kill Saul. David refuses, saying, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to put forth my hand against him, seeing he is the Lord's anointed," and he contents himself with simply cutting off a piece of Saul's garments, to prove that he harbors no malice against him (I Sam. 24:1-22). Later on, when Saul is again vulnerable, David refuses to allow any harm to come to him, saying, "Do not destroy him; for who can put forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?" (I Sam. 26:9).

What remarkable reverence David has for the Lord's anointed! Even though Saul is wicked, he has been given a special office by God, and to attack him is to attack Yahweh. This is a crucial reminder to us as Catholics today: after all, the Church has had various individuals in office- popes, bishops, and priest- who have been corrupt. Nonetheless, the corruption of certain persons in authority does not imply that the office itself is to be done away with, or that the Lord's anointed are not deserving of our obedience in matters of faith and morals and our respect and deference.

The Death of Saul and the Accession of David

After the death of Samuel (I Sam. 25:1) the Philistines have assembled a great army, much to the fear of Saul. He inquires of the Lord, but God does not answer him because Saul had turned his heart from Yahweh in pride and disobedience. Saul experienced the reality of many people in the world: they cannot hear God in prayer, because their sin is blocking His grace. In desperation Saul breaks his own law by seeking out a medium-the witch of Endor-for the purpose of recalling the deceased Samuel to gain some prophecy. He thus turns to the immorality of magic in order to achieve his goals, and he is deeply disappointed (as are all who turn to sin to get what they want). Samuel does indeed rise up and prophecy for him, but what he foretells is far from comforting: "The Lord has done to you as he spoke by me; for the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbor, David. Because you did not obey the voice of the Lord... tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; the Lord will give the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines" (I Sam. 28:3-19).

The prophecy is fulfilled: Saul and three of his sons die upon the battlefield against the Philistines (I Sam. 31:1-6). A messenger joyfully comes to tell David the news, claiming to have been the one who put Saul out of his misery. David's response is not what the messenger expected: "Then David took hold of his clothes, and rent them; and so did all the men who were with him; and they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul... David said to him, 'How is it you were not afraid to put forth your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?' Then David called one of the young men and said, 'Go, fall upon him.' And he smote him so that he died" (II Sam. 1:1-15). Far from exulting in his own personal safety, David mourns the loss of Yahweh's king and the loss of his son Jonathan, such is his degree of virtuous self-forgetfulness.

Prayerfully, David asks God what he is to do. The Lord instructs him to go to Hebron, where he is finally made king (II Sam. 2:1,4). And all the tribes of Israel come to David at Hebron, in order to make a covenant with him, and so he becomes the ruler of all Israel (II Sam. 5:1-6). At last the Davidic line has been established; the line which will find its fulfillment in the Messiah.

Bringing up the Ark

Designed under the direction of Moses, the Ark of the Covenant was the tabernacle where God's presence or glory had dwelt since the time of the Exodus Ex. 40:34-38). This was the visible sign of "Emmanuel," or "God with us." So, in order that the presence of God might be at the center of his royal reign, David starts his rule by bringing the Ark to Jerusalem in a beautiful procession "making merry with all their might" (II Sam. 6:1-15). This was really the keystone for David's blessed kingdom, for God rewards those who honor Him with a place of centrality. God's presence also ought to be at the center of our lives, and this is especially true with regard to the Real Presence of the Eucharist, the most profound presence of God in our world.

Not only is the Ark of the Covenant an apt symbol for the Eucharist, it is also a powerful image of Our Lady, for just as the Ark was the container for the glory of God on earth, so too Mary was the container for the glory of God on earth, that is, the Holy Spirit and Christ the Lord. She is the one through whom we can say, Emmanuel, "God is with us." And although the Ark is lost from the history of the chosen people, Yahweh has constructed a new dwelling place for His presence: Mary, the perfect temple of the Holy Spirit, and the most beautiful resting place for God made man (CCC #721). Lastly, the Ark served as a mighty weapon for the Israelites (c.f., Joshua 6:4 at the battle of Jericho), and now it is Mary who has a decisive role in the Christian's spiritual battle. She is the new Ark of the Covenant, who mediates the presence of God to the Chosen People.

Postscript: The Visitation and the Arrival of the Ark

In Luke's narration of the Visitation, we see a very striking similarity between the coming of the Ark of the Covenant (II Samuel 6:2-16) and coming of the Mother of God (Luke 1:39-56):

- 1) David *arose and went* back to Judah to a house which was on a *hill* (II Sam 6:2-3)
Mary *arose and went* to the *hill country of Judah* (Lk 1:39)
- 2) "How can the ark of the covenant of the *Lord come to me?* (II Sam 6:9)
"Who am I that the mother of my *Lord should come to me?* (Lk 1:43)
- 3) *To the house* of Obed-dom (II Sam 6:10)
To the house of Zechariah (Lk 1:40)
- 4) The Ark was *there for three months* (II Sam 6:11)
Mary stayed *there three months* (Lk 1:56)
- 5) There was *rejoicing* (II Sam 6:12)
Mary *rejoices* (Lk 1:47)
- 6) David shouting (II Sam 6:15)
Elizabeth's loud cry (Lk 1:42)
- 7) There is leaping and dancing (II Sam 6:17)
The babe leaps in Elizabeth's womb (Lk 1:41)