

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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SOMETHING BETTER

21st April 2013

2 Samuel 7:1-18
Matthew 19:23-30

Have you ever made plans for something-for a day out, or a holiday, or a project at work, or a whole new direction in your life? Have you ever made what seemed to you to be very good plans, and found suddenly that they are not working as you hoped, that they are not appreciated by others as you had expected, and that there are actually better plans which can be made? This was David's experience.

Or have you ever made plans to give someone a present, a present that you so much want to give, that you can't imagine anyone not liking. You plan and you organise and then the day of presentation comes. And then when it is presented, you realise that it is a failure, it is not the great desire of the person you thought it would please. This too was David's experience.

David had rest from the continual strain of planning for battle, he and the nation had peace at last. David is enjoying life as king, living in the palace built for Saul, his father-in-law, and he is grateful. He is grateful to God for the way his life has turned out. It is so different from what he must have expected in the days when he took care of his father's flocks, and knew himself to be the least important in the family. Here he is, King of God's people. And he wants to express his gratitude and show his faith, show to everyone that he knows where his blessings, and the nation's blessings have come from. He wants to build God a temple.

Or maybe he wants to build God a temple so that the nations with whom they have so lately been at war will see that there is a holy place in Israel, just as there is in other nations. Everyone seems to want a temple, so why wouldn't Yahweh, the God of Israel?

David makes his plans, and he runs them by his spiritual adviser, Nathan the prophet, and to both of them they seem good. "Go ahead," says Nathan.

But in the night Nathan has a message from God, which he faithfully passes on to David. One of the things I respect about David is that although his faith in God is so important to him, and so personal, nearly always God does not speak to him directly, but through others. And David is prepared to take

their word for what God says. So here, Nathan brings word that God has said that the plan is not as good as they think, and that it is not as good as the plan that he, God, has for David. And David does not object or sulk. He does not question Nathan's word, or argue. He worships and wonders and praises God.

David has enough sense to understand, once he hears them, how much better are God's plans than his. He wanted to do something for God that all the non-gods of the surrounding nations had done for them. But maybe that would be to bring God, the God of creation, of all power and glory, down to the same level as the non-gods of the other nations. He wanted to do something for God, but God is going to do something far better for him. He wanted to build with stones, but God is planning to build in faith and human lives. David's plan seems good in human terms, which is why Nathan approves it at first, but God thinks longer and deeper thoughts.

How often we forget this when our plans don't work out as we expect or hope. God, who is far greater and wiser than us, thinks longer and deeper thoughts than us, God sees further, God plans more magnificently. And God does not need our gestures to show his glory. Later Solomon would build a temple for God and it was magnificent, but it was nothing compared to the witness to God's glory which can be seen in his creation: in seas and mountains, in sunsets and the plumage of even common birds.

David made his plans, but in planning he forgot to ask God what he had planned. He made plans in line with the wisdom of the surrounding nations, forgetting that God had chosen Israel to be a different kind of nation and people, to be a witness to the nations, not one of them. So God's plans were different than human wisdom would expect, and what God planned was to work with David, to show his glory through David's family, his descendants. So God makes the wonderful promise to David, that he will not take his steadfast love from David's son, his line, if they go astray - as he took it from Saul, the first king, the king who had no dynasty. He will discipline David's descendants if, when they stray, but he will not remove his love. Not ever. That is what steadfast love means.

And that is where our second reading comes in. Jesus has been talking to the man we know as the rich young ruler. The man who wanted eternal life, who wanted to be part of God's kingdom, who claimed that he had kept the commandments, but who couldn't find it in his heart to put Jesus first, before all that he had. And Jesus tells his followers that it will be hard for those who are rich to be part of God's kingdom. This is revolutionary. We have heard it so often that we almost don't hear it now. We have heard it, and we, who have much, have tried to rationalise it, explain it away, and we have forgotten to let ourselves be astounded by what Jesus said.

"It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus lived in a world where it was assumed that to have riches was a sign of God's favour. It was a good thing to be rich. We live in a world that thinks exactly the same thing. If people think about God at all, the assumption is that his favour is shown in tangible ways. Our finite minds cannot help thinking that those who are wicked should not be allowed to also be rich, to be comfortable. Therefore riches and comforts should be a sign of merit, of having deserved them, and so of God's favour.

If you are unconvinced that this fairly crude assumption flourishes in our society, then think how often you have said, or have heard someone else say, "He didn't deserve this," when someone is laid low with illness. Or when things are going well, have you not said or thought, "What did I do to be so lucky?" We believe in cause and effect, and so did the disciples and all the people of Jesus' day.

And if the effect is riches, then the cause should be merit. In a way this is something of a generic plan which we make and offer to God, which we expect at God will endorse and approve. We say that we think it would be good and right if his blessing were shown in material terms and as an obvious reward for merit.

But God simply does not buy it. Jesus said that it would be hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus rejected our assumptions and our plans. He asked us, he still asks us, to look deeper, to think longer thoughts to learn to watch and listen and have our assumptions changed.

The disciples are astounded at what Jesus says, and then they begin to wonder what will be in it for them. Self interest is a very immediate and human reaction. They have left everything, what will they be given? Jesus reassures them about the homes, family and property that they will find comes to them - and many Christians who have faithfully sought to follow have been able to bear witness to the truth of that. But the main reward, the main incentives held out to the disciples are that in the age that is coming in they will have eternal life, and that they will sit on thrones, judging the tribes of Israel. God is giving his people authority. He is giving them a place in his plans, he is showing them that they are part of something far bigger than profit allows, than riches and poverty, and self-interest.

When the promise was given that God would not withdraw his favour from David's descendants, it was fulfilled, as all promises given in the Old Testament were fulfilled, in Jesus. Jesus, born, as the gospel writers are keen to tell us, of the line of David, was the ultimate example of God favouring David's line and building his house. Jesus was the one who was to establish the kingdom, not of David, but of heaven, of God. Jesus was the one who brought in a whole new age in the world, the age of the kingdom of heaven (because the phrase does not just mean the heaven of God's glory where we go when we die). And although the promise was fulfilled in Jesus, it wasn't ended then. Instead it was sent out again through the new Israel, the new descendants of David, the new people who were to act as the old Israel was supposed to, as priests and prophets to the world: through Jesus' followers.

And so the disciples are told that they are to be given authority, the royal authority, the authority of God himself. That is what God has in mind, in his plans for them and for all Jesus' followers since then. It is what God has in mind in his plans for you and me. It is something far better than the home and family and provisions that we want him to give us as a sign of his favour.

David wanted to use his riches, the royal treasury, to do something for God. But God thinks deeper and longer and simply astoundingly better thoughts than we do or can. He wanted to make David part of his plan for saving and renewing the world. The disciples - and we - want to look to God to give us the security and comforts of life. But God wants to do far more than that. He wants to make us part of his plan for saving and renewing the world. I hope it makes you think.