

Reflection – The Old Testament – Sarah Penfold

There are few people who have not had some sort of challenge over the last few months. Some sort of challenge about behaviour, what to do or not do, what to say or not say. It is easy as individuals to feel inadequate, somehow not up to those challenges. And during this period the daily lectionary readings have included Samuel as the Old Testament reading for morning prayer.

The two books of Samuel are about a period when Israel was undergoing significant change from being a group of people governed by the Judges to a nation with an established monarchy. The way that they wrote about the past also changed. From a narrative based on a tradition of storytelling about individuals to a more formal account of the events that took place. In this period of change the writing is a mixture of the two and we are treated to an action-packed account of the lives of Samuel, Saul, David and their contemporaries. It is as good as any action packed Hollywood blockbuster.

I have enjoyed reacquainting myself with some of the less well-known parts of the story but have especially found the characters interesting. Most of them are less than perfect. Those who themselves always act in appropriate ways have family members who don't. There is violence and intrigue. What a helpful reminder that God does not only deal with the people who get things right.

The Old Testament is such rich literature – the ultimate story book. Full of the adventures of a people whose relationship with God was part of their everyday life, not apart from it. Although the settings are so different from our own and what we are reading has all been written with the benefit of hindsight there are many parallels with the modern world, many characters who we can recognise today.

Think of Noah. So trusting in God that he built the ark and loaded the animals despite it seeming so unnecessary. Would his neighbours have laughed as he did this? Probably. How did his wife and sons feel? What about the daughters in law finding that the head of their new family was acting so strangely and expecting them to go along with it? I can't imagine that I would be getting into the ark without a very vocal protest.

Moses the reluctant leader. But given the responsibility of leading the Israelites out of Egypt and through the desert, the work of a lifetime until they reached the Promised Land. As we see our own political leaders struggle with the enormity of their decisions, with the need to change direction, with the need to make decisions that may adversely affect their friends but are for the good of others. From what we read in Exodus the Israelites were not unlike us. They did not like to be told what to do. When food was provided, the same food for everyone, always enough, not too much, they remained unhappy. They did not

want the pressure of leadership themselves but were not slow in complaining. Put in this context Moses' achievements seem even greater.

King David himself. Revered by history. Royal David's city, predicted as the birthplace of Christ. David the king anointed by Samuel, favoured by God. However his personal life doesn't reflect the standards we expect of leaders with integrity. But we can see how it reflects the standards we see from modern politicians.

Jonah reluctant to follow God's will. He actively went against God's instruction to go to Nineveh and set off in another direction but through that wonderful story of being swallowed by a whale Jonah is redirected. And when he finds himself in Nineveh? Well it wasn't so bad after all.

We have to accept that the stories are written within the context of life at that time, therefore the role of women is less obvious than now and many of their stories are about the circumstances of them giving birth to the sons have significant roles later. But what about Ruth and Judith whose actions have their own significance?. Even within the story of Jacob his willingness to work for 14 years for Rachel the wife that he wanted – what sort of lesson does that provide us about the need to be patient? Some things are worth waiting for. In a man's world for women to be the subject of these stories gives them an added significance.

When I was in Sunday school, we used to sing 'God has given us a book full of stories, it was meant for his people of old'. Well it was meant for his people of old but also for his people now. These Old Testament tales were the stories that would have been familiar to the original followers of Christ, brought up as they were in the Jewish faith. Familiar to Christ himself. Many of them are echoed in the events of his life.

Despite the gap in times, the differences in our way of life the people who feature in the Old Testament are familiar to us today. They show the same strengths and weaknesses. They also lived in a changing world it may not have changed as quickly as ours but still changing. Like us they were imperfect, often challenged, had feelings of inadequacy, and were threatened by people and events beyond their control.

In uncertain times it is good to remember that what went before was not perfect. People have always struggled with physical difficulty, with relationship with each other. It is our relationship with God that allows us to take on the challenge of the lives we lead, just as it did for those Old Testament heroes. The Old Testament serves as a good reminder of what has been overcome in the past. It can also provide a thrilling escapist read. Enjoy!