

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Morning Service on Sunday 14th June 2015
by Rev Trevor Thomas**

Text:

- From 1 Samuel 15 and 16. Ancient Israel's first king has failed. In place of Saul the prophet Samuel must anoint a successor. But, who is it to be? Our Old Testament reading unfolds the scene and provides the answer.
- From Matthew 6. In the Gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of treasure and what it reveals about the human heart.

1 Samuel 15: 34 - 16: 13

Matthew 6: 19 – 24

“The Lord does not see as a mortal sees; mortals see only appearances but the Lord *sees into* the heart” (1 Samuel 16: 7, R.E.B.)

So, what does our text communicate to us today? First, realism. The person I really am has its centre, its heart. And into that centre, that heart, God sees.

Often enough, like Saul and David, I try to conceal my true self from others, and even from myself. Sometimes this is because I find it too painful to face up to the gulf between what I would be and what is actually there. One of the differences between Saul and David, according to our sources, is that, while Saul never truly came to terms with his failures, David apparently did. For Saul confession comes across as a desperate tactical manoeuvre; for David it went deeper.

The Book of Psalms records 13 prayers which begin with a summary of an incident in David's life. Perhaps the best known is Psalm 51, with its introductory title – ‘for David (when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had taken Bathsheba)’. “My sins,” he says, “confront me all the time” (v 3); then he dares to ask God to wipe out all his iniquity, to create for him a pure heart, and to give him a new and steadfast spirit (vv 9 and 10). There is a real mystery about the human heart – the place in which we find a longing for steadfast and loving relationships; but the place too where, time and again, we find frailty and faithlessness, and we are brought down to earth with a bump!

Yet, if our text conveys realism, it also insists on possibility. The heart into which God looks is restless until it finds its rest in God. And the young shepherd boy will through courage and honesty and, above all, trust in his Shepherd Lord, come to pin all his hopes on the divine presence, pleading that it may never be withdrawn (Psalms 23 and 51: 11).

This great possibility, to which the story of David points, comes to flower in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus insists on the possibility of choice. There is a treasure to be discovered, whoever I am and whatever my circumstances.

But where do I search? Where I look for the treasure will reveal the inclination of my heart. Is it leaning towards self-assertion, the realisation of my earthly ambitions? Or do I choose

to go deeper than that? Daring to be open to the divine Spirit, and to others? One choice, says Jesus, ultimately leads to darkness, the other to eternal light (Matthew 6: 22f).

This too is about the religion of the heart. For, as Jesus says in his sermon, where your treasure is there will your heart be also (Matthew 6: 21).

In my late teens, during the ferment caused by the publication of 'Honest to God', I remember snapping up a thin paperback by a German scholar. 'Jesus and the Word' was the title, the author Rudolf Bultmann. It was first published in Germany in 1926.

What was Bultmann's key message? It was this: we all stand on the brink of decision. That is our human situation. Moment by moment we face a fundamental choice. I either choose to follow my own will or seek and follow the will of God. And the challenge faces me hour by hour, moment by moment.

This twentieth century message is all of a piece with Torah Judaism. 'I have set before you life and death', says the biblical writer in Deuteronomy: 'Now choose life, so that you and your children may live' (Deuteronomy 30: 19). The great possibility is the possibility of choice; it is what makes us human.

Fifteen years after the opening of this Methodist church building a minister came to serve the Wesleyan Circuit here in Banbury. His name was Alfred Henry Vine. He only stayed for a year, but he left his mark through the hymns he composed. One of them concerns the human heart. Here are the last two verses:

*But, ah, this faithless heart of mine!
The way I know, I know my guide;
Forgive me, O my friend divine,
That I so often turn aside.*

*Be with me when no other friend
The mystery of my heart can share;
And be thou known, when fears transcend,
By thy best name of Comforter.*

The God who sees into our hearts, and who asks us to find our treasure, is a realist. God knows that, even if we find real treasure, we are unable to keep that treasure safe unaided. As the old Prayer Book puts it, 'We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.'

Alfred Vine's hymn speaks directly to our condition. Not only are we offered forgiveness when we fail, but two other things as well. First of all inner strength. Where does it come from? Bishop John Robinson spoke of the 'Beyond in the Midst', and the Gospel of John speaks of the Comforter.

The strength we are offered cannot be described as some impersonal force. We feel bound to search for a much more personal language. And it is there! For the second thing we are offered is friendship: the intimate friendship Jesus promised in the Upper Room. In other words, when I choose the way of Christ, the way of Christ as the radical alternative to the way of a selfish world, I shall find something quite extraordinary: not a lonely quest for an ideal that is for ever beyond my reach, but a transforming friendship. The God of Love

coming to meet me, offering me an unbreakable relationship, enabling me to become what I am.

Methodists know this as a shared way, as a common life. We sing our faith in our chapels and churches, we share our hopes and fears in our house groups and fellowships. We are there for each other in our times of joy and sorrow. The Comforter in our midst transforms us, and helps us to be a transforming presence in the community. In practical terms Methodist Homes provide the setting for that common life for thousands of frail and elderly people, and we rightly celebrate its work today.

And what of our Psalm 51 moments? When some dreadful moral failure overshadows our common life and brings us bitter sorrow. We acknowledge the wrong and pray for cleansing and renewal. And then we dare to hope that, even though it is broken and contrite hearts that we bring to God, the Comforter will fill those hearts with divine love. And that the darkness will never master the light of Christ, either in ourselves or in our witness in the world.

Here is the religion of the heart: plain realism, but also the possibility of lasting treasure; above all, through the wonderful presence of the Comforter, the promise of transforming grace.

Thanks be to God.