

1 SAM 16.1-13: CHOOSING A LEADER

[Chelmsford 31 January 2010 – within context of a church meeting]

God has greatly blessed us this year with the provision of Nicholas as our associate minister, as also with Emma as our community outreach worker.

Alas, neither Nicholas nor Emma are permanent fixtures. Both will be leaving us this summer – Nicholas together with his wife Amanda will be returning to Australia; and Emma, God willing, will be moving on to train for the Baptist ministry.

So the challenge we face is to find their successors.

It is not an easy process. As many of you will know, we have been engaged in this process since last September. In December we thought that we had perhaps found a successor to Nicholas. He first met with me, then with the leadership team, and then he came to preach on a Sunday – but then to the surprise of us all, he withdrew. Clearly he was not God's man for us.

In our search for new leaders we have in the first place sought the help of the Baptist Union. Every month we have been supplied by the national settlement team with three or four names of people looking for a church – but so far not one has been right.

Just before Christmas the leadership team decided to advertise our staffing needs.

So we placed adverts in both the *Baptist Times* as also in *Christianity* for “a specialist in students and young adults' ministry”.

I have also been in touch with the UCCF, who have promised to advertise our post in their February newsletter which goes out to all their field workers.

As a result of our advertising we have had some thirteen enquiries – I have written to all seven, sending them a copy of our church development plan, and asking for them to send a copy of their CV by 2nd February at the latest.

This is the context in which over the last two or three weeks one particular passage of Scripture has become very pertinent to me: 1 Sam 16 – the passage which describes the occasion when Samuel was looking for a successor to King Saul.

It's a great story made for telling to children. Seven candidates appear before Samuel – first Eliab, then Shammah, then five further sons of Jesse. Is it him? No! Is it that one? No!

Not one of them who appeared before Samuel was right to be the next leader.

Poor old Samuel, what a dreadful day that must have been, as God eliminated all seven

candidates. “**Have you any more sons?**” (v11) Samuel asked Jesse. And, of course, there was one more. And to Samuel's great relief, God had kept the best candidate till last. The Lord said to Samuel, “**This is the one – anoint him!**” (v12).

Yes, it's a great story. But it is more than a story.

I believe that it has something to say to us in our search for new leaders.

True, the situation then and our situation today is different. For instance:

- In the story, the need for a new leader had arisen because God had rejected Saul as leader of Israel. Saul had failed to live up to his calling. Our situation is very different God has not rejected Nicholas or Emma – neither of them have failed to live up to their calling – instead, God is simply calling them on to pastures new.
- In the Bible story Samuel's search for a new leader is limited to a particular village, and to a particular family. In our search there is no such limitation. We are not looking for people from just one theological college - in principle we are open to leaders from anywhere – indeed, if God were to supply us with another leader.

Yet, for all the differences, as I have reflected on this passage of Scripture, some principles have emerged.

1. God will guide us, but patience is needed

Just as God has a plan for each one of our lives, so I believe that he has a plan for the life of our church. Unfortunately God does not normally unfold his full plan for us in one go: instead he tends to guide us one step at a time – and it is not until we have taken the first step, that he will show us the second step.

Samuel knew that he had to anoint one of Jesse's sons, but it took him some time to discover which one. One after the other of Jesse's sons came before him – but it wasn't until the final son came before him, that Samuel discovered God's man..

The fact is that when God guides, patience is often needed.

Patience, alas, is one thing we find difficult.

We live in an age of instant everything, and we expect God to come in the same packaging...

Samuel was clearly tempted to jump the gun.

When he saw Eliab, the eldest of Jesse's sons, he was sure that this was God's man. It all seemed so obvious. But the obvious is not always God's way.

Samuel had to learn to be patient – and so too do we.

I confess that I am finding the selection process difficult.

It is time consuming – it is frustrating.

However, I believe that God has someone in mind for our church.

He will guide – in the meantime God calls us to be patient.

2. God looks for leaders whose heart is right

Samuel was most impressed by Eliab – he had good looks, he had a commanding presence, he was the eldest of Jesse's sons. **“But the Lord said to him. ‘Pay no attention to how tall and handsome he is. I have rejected him, because I do not judge as people judge. They look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart’”** (16.7).

It's so easy to be fooled by appearances. But appearances can be deceptive. We're perhaps looking for someone to lead a particular activity in the church – all of a sudden a new person begins to attend church – he or she seems to be just the person we need – they are clearly are gifted – and yet sometimes it is not enough to be gifted – what counts is the heart – where the heart is right with God, then the gifts will be rightly used.

What do we mean by a person whose heart is right? An earlier verse gives the clue: in 1 Sam 13.14 Samuel says to Saul: “**The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart**” (NRSV). The Apostle Paul develops this thought when in a sermon preached in Pisidian Antioch he quoted God as saying, “**I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes**” (Acts 13.22 NRSV). In a way which was perhaps not true of his brothers, David was passionate to serve God. His ‘heart’ was right.

According to one commentator, the heart represents issues such as “*motivation, thought processes and loyalty*” (David Firth).

According to another commentator David “*had learnt submission through being the youngest of his father's sons and yet had shown himself capable of taking responsibility for the family's flocks*” (John B. Taylor). David wasn't just spiritually-minded, he was eminently trustworthy.

It so happened, that not only was David's heart right – he was also an immensely attractive individual too. “**He was a handsome, healthy young man, and his eyes sparkled**” (v12) But above all, he was a man after God's heart.

When it comes to our search for a leader – we are looking for a person with gifts – we are looking for a person who can present him or herself well. But above all, we are looking for a person whose heart is right.

That's not easy to discern. But just as Samuel, when he saw David, was God's man – so I believe that when the right person appears before us, we too will know in our gut that ‘this is God's leader for us’.

3. God often chooses young people to be leaders

Jesse presented seven of his sons to Samuel – but not one of the seven was right. “**No**”, said Samuel, “**the Lord hasn't chosen any of these... Have you any more sons?**”. Somewhat dismissively Jesse replied, “**There is still the youngest, but he is taking care of the sheep**” (v11). Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase: “*Well, yes, there's the runt. But he's out tending the sheep*”.

As far as Jesse was concerned, David was not old enough to count. Actually, we have no idea how old David was. He is described as a “**young man**” in v12. Was he still in his teens? Or was he in his early 20s? We just don't know. But as far as God was concerned, this young man was to be the leader of his people.

I think there is a lesson here for us. There is a lesson for us in our search for a replacement for Nicholas & Emma. I think we should be open to a young leader – in particular a leader who is in touch with the culture of young adults today.

However, there is also a lesson here for us in our search for leaders generally. Young people are not just the future of the church – they are the church of today. God can and does call young people to serve him
Indeed, God can and does call young people to lead his church.

I think back to the time when I began in ministry. I was 27 when I was first in pastoral charge of a church. Indeed, had I not first spent two years as a missionary, I could have been 25. Yet in our church there is nobody in their 20s who is a deacon – indeed, I don't think there is anybody even in their 30s. Apart from Emma, the leadership team is made up of people all over 40 – and some of us a good deal older than that.

Don't get me wrong. Of course there is a place for older people in Christian leadership. God didn't call Moses until he has 40; indeed Moses was 80 when he actually led the people of Israel out of Egypt. But God has always called young people too – he called Jeremiah, he called Timothy, he called David. Who is he calling today?