

SERMON: 10 JUNE 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“THE EXPERIENCE OF REJECTION AND THE PRESSURE TO CONFORM”
(1 Samuel 8:4-22, Mark 3:20-35)**

How God overcomes the experience of rejection and the pressure to conform

In the book of the prophet Hosea, God says, in my anger, I gave you kings (13:11). In other words, God let them have what they wanted. Someone once said that the greatest trouble God can bring on people is to leave them to their own devices.

God knew that shifting dependence to earthly rulers wouldn't go well. But he let them find out.

God, through the prophet, warns his people of the dangers of putting their faith in a kingdom other than his. Left to their own devices, its only a matter of time before individuals go there own way and life becomes all about self preservation and self advancement, and the whole world goes to pot.

So why on earth would God's people want to go this way? Well it seems they looked around and they saw the nations around them fighting to advance their own cause, to defend themselves, to compete and invade, to take over, to build an empire. That seemed to be the way to prosper, a survival of the fittest - those with the biggest army and the best weapons, were the strongest. And they thought 'we want to be like them, we want to be able to defend ourselves like them and prosper like them, we want to be strong, we want to build an empire too, and defend ourselves against enemies. We want a king to rule us.

And the prophet tries to warn them about going down this route, that it will mean becoming slaves to the empire that the king will build. A king like the one they wished for would conscript their sons to fight in his army, putting their lives at risk for the cause of nationalism; and they will be forced to work in his fields, to make weapons and chariots of war, killing machines. He will confiscate their lands and their flocks and demand tithes of their harvests, tithes that were due to go to God according to the law of Moses. It would be like going back to slavery in Egypt again, and the day would come when they would cry out for relief from their chosen king, but the Lord would not hear

their cry, because they would have turned from him and from his ways. They would be left to the lot they'd chosen.

But despite these warnings they still wanted their own king. They were succumbing to the pressure to conform, to be like the nations of the world, to blend in and not be different.

So there we see two powerful spiritual forces at work - the enslavement of earthly kingdoms and the pressure to conform. Then there is the experience of rejection. Samuel feels rejected and when he takes it to the Lord, his God, in prayer, God makes it clear that it isn't Samuel they are rejecting, it is God who's being rejected. God knows what its like to experience rejection. He's got well used to it, even by those who he chose to follow him.

Jesus was familiar with rejection. It was part of his daily bread. He faced rejection from so many people - the religious leaders, the disciples he chose to follow him, and even his own family. In Mark 3, his own family come to steal him away because they think he's out of his mind. They can't believe that he is who he claims to be and they're embarrassed to be associated with him. And they try to take steps to deal with him, and stop him from causing further embarrassment.

When Jesus says that his true mother, brother and sister are those who do the will of God, it sounds like he's saying that obedience to God trumps family loyalty. But before we go cutting off family members who don't live the same way as we do, we need to pause and think about that. He wasn't saying family were to be cut off. That would be to misread scripture, with a black and white mind set, an either/or interpretation, and reduce any thinking to 'you're either in or you're out, for you can't be in between'.

I don't think life is like that. Isn't life more about shades of colour than just monochrome black and white? I think Jesus meant that only with obedience to God can there be true family loyalty; and only with love for God, can we discover true love for others (and for ourselves). And its him in our lives that causes the difference to happen.

Jesus wasn't rejecting the family who'd not yet accepted who he was. But he was entirely focussed on being who God made him to be and not succumb to the pressure to conform to what others wanted him to be. He was being distinctive, different, unique, true to his calling, the person God

made him to be, He knew that only in God, can a person discover their true call, and become who they are meant to be. And God has shown us who we are meant to be like, by revealing Jesus to us, the unique God-man, who invites us to discover our own uniqueness, through him and in him.

So when we face rejection, we can know that God knows exactly what its like. But more than that. In Jesus, God has gone through it and redeemed it. Therefore, God can work with us when we face rejection, to overcome it.

This week, I came across two very powerful stories of people who have overcome rejection with God's help.

Rabbi Zev Porat was from along line of orthodox Jewish priests. His father and grandfather were heads of the Sanhedrin. He began to question his faith and that started a long journey and searching on the internet for several years and God began to wake him up at night. And on one occasion Yeshua Ha Mashia, Jesus the Messiah, appears to him and shakes his entire world. His family disown him. They consider him dead to them. When people ask of Zev they tell them he died. He lost his job for refusing to disown the name of Yeshua.

The second recent story was about a man called Ali. went with a bunch of friends on the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca, They walk around the Kaaba seven times but his heart's not really in it. That first night back at his hotel, Jesus appears to him in a vision and in the vision he marks his head and heart and tells him "you have been saved, you belong to me, go back to your own country, find your friends". He goes back. His family disown him but he doesn't give up. He starts to tell his friends about the Jesus who appeared to him at the Haj and who is the Saviour of the World.

The Bible reminds us that all affliction is transient, its passing through, it won't last forever, one day it'll be gone. But the Bible also teaches us that affliction, rejection, suffering, whatever it is, it prepares us, its part of the inner renewal that is taking place, a softening of the heart (2 Corinthians 4:16-17). How we respond is key. We are not to focus on what's passing through but on what will last forever. We're to let go of the earthly, temporary, even our own bodies, which are temporary containers of the glory of God. We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we're wasting away but inwardly we're being renewed day by day.

Earthly kingdoms will come and go, but God's kingdom will last forever, where freedom not slavery is the norm, where people discover their true worth, where people are free from the pressure to conform to something other than who they are, where rejection is replaced with a spirit of belonging, of true family, of real loyalty. We are invited to let Christ embody us into such a kingdom together here in KNEC, to be an outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven, to the glory of God.