

## **SERMON: Sunday – 24 October 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **What is it we want to see?**

**1 Samuel 8:1-18**

**Mark 10:46-52**

In the history of ancient Israel, the prophet Samuel was a legend. The last great prophetic leader anointed by God to lead his people in the days before Israel succumbed to the lure of an earthly king and empire.

Sadly, Samuel's sons did not follow Samuel's ways.

As the Scriptures declare,  
They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

The text doesn't tell us that Samuel was disappointed but one suspects he must have been.

You must have been able to feel the frustration in the air for the elders of Israel came to Samuel demanding he appointed them a king to lead them, just like all the other nations have.

Samuel is displeased but he does what he always does, he takes it to the Lord in prayer, and the Lord tells him that it is not Samuel that the people are rejecting but it is God they are rejecting as king, just as they've always done since their exodus from slavery in Egypt, running after other gods, seeking false idols.

God knows that to seek an earthly king is not a good move for his people to make, for he sees what will happen if they go down this path.

A king would conscript your sons into war and force people into slavery making weapons, farming food on an industrial scale, commandeering land and fields, upsetting the ancient ways of living to favour the rich and make the poor poorer. A day would come when the people would cry out for relief but there would be no answer.

You might have thought that such a warning would've been enough for the people to say, 'you're right Samuel, that sounds awful, we'll stick with the God we know'. Sadly, not so.

And so for the next 1,000 years, God's people were plagued with the scourge

of imperialism and militarism, fighting for their lives.

A thousand years later, God became flesh and pitched his tent among us. A Saviour was born whose kingdom would never end.

(SLIDE)

In the words of Simeon when baby Jesus is presented in the Temple,

“.. my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel.”  
(Luke 2:30-32)

Light had come at last, into the darkness of Israel’s past. Light, not just for Israel, but for the whole world.

Light that would give sight to blind beggars sitting by the roadsides of this life. Light for all who wanted to see.

When Bartimaeus is asked by Jesus, “What do you want me to do for you?”, he simply says, “Rabbi, I want to see”.

He wanted to see even the small and simple things. He wanted to be able to earn his own living and not rely on begging strangers. He wanted to see things differently. He wanted to see the kingdom of God as it really.

There is such a contrast between the kingdom that Jesus helped to reveal and the kingdom that the Hebrew people had endured for the previous millennia. Something changed with Jesus.

(SLIDE)

In the words of the writer Brian McLaren,

“The God imaged by Jesus exerts no dominating supremacy. In Christ, we see an image of a God who is not armed with lightning bolts but with basin and towel, who spewed not threats but good news for all, who rode not a warhorse but a donkey, weeping in compassion for people who do not know the way of peace. In Christ, God is supreme, but not in the old discredited paradigm of supremacy: God is the supreme healer, the supreme friend, the supreme lover, the supreme life-giver who self-empties in gracious love for all. The king of kings and lord of lords is the servant of all and the friend of sinners. The so-called weakness and foolishness of God are greater than the so-called power and wisdom of human regimes.

In the aftermath of Jesus and his cross, we should never again define God’s

sovereignty or supremacy by analogy to the kings of this world who dominate, oppress, subordinate, exploit, scapegoat and marginalise [see Luke 22:25–27]. Instead, we have migrated to an entirely new universe, or, as Paul says, “a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17) in which old ideas of supremacy are subverted.

Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (Convergent: 2016)

Now this new creation is still ongoing and we are invited to take part in God’s ongoing creation of the world. Unfortunately, it didn’t all change overnight when God took on flesh in Jesus.

You might have thought that the church would be the place for the kingdom of God to be most evident. In theory that should be the case. However, history has shown that to not always be the case.

Towards the end of the Roman Empire, the Emperor Constantine in the year 313 made Christianity a legal religion after 3 centuries of persecution by Rome. And according to several historians, an imperial mindset took over the church. The church became hierarchical rather than servant minded. It became less and less like Jesus, less nonviolent, less inclusive, less forgiving, less simple and instead became complicit in the world of domination, power, war, and greed.

(SLIDE)

Verna Dozier (1917–2006) in his book *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cowley Publications: 1991) highlights some of the significant shifts that took place when Christianity became an imperial religion:

“It is hard for us to understand what happened to the people of God under Constantine. Surely the church got a breathing space from persecution. . . . Constantine dreamed of restoring the ancient glory of the empire, and he believed that could be best achieved through Christianity. Constantine himself was not changed; the church was. It became the imperial church. Christian worship began to be influenced by imperial protocol. Incense, the sign of respect for the emperor, began to appear in Christian churches. Ministers began dressing in more luxurious garments, processions and choirs developed, and eventually the congregation came to have a less active role in the worship.

More important than any of this, however, was the kind of theology that developed. The gospel of good news to the poor now saw riches and pomp as signs of divine favour. The coming kingdom of God was no longer a fundamental theme. In the view of Eusebius [c. 260–c. 340], the father of church history, the plan of God had been fulfilled in Constantine and his

successors. Beyond the present political order, all that Christians can hope for is their own personal transference into the heavenly kingdom.

I think this is what happens when the church loses its sight and becomes like a blind beggar sitting by the roadside.

The church may have at times lost her sight. But Jesus still walks by and still asks, "what is it you want me to do for you?"

Waiting for us to respond with the plea, we want to see, Jesus sends us out in faith, inviting us to follow HIS way along the road, not the way of consumerism, militarism, or greed.

Christ is the Light who invites us to envision a better way of doing things, in love. And that better way is what he called the kingdom or reign of God.

Now that's something we all want to see.