

Sermon 19 June 2016

Celebrations for Queen Elizabeth's 90th birthday took place across the world last week and London was full of well-wishers. Kings and queens are very much part of the British history and culture, whereas for Swiss people monarchs belong the world of fairytales. The only queens and kings that we ever see in Switzerland's streets are during carnival.

Like in Britain, royalty are also omnipresent in the Old Testament and are an important part of biblical literature. However, in the early days it was quite controversial whether the Israelites should be headed by a king. When the first king of Israel, King Saul, was appointed, some people said: "See, the Lord has set a king over us." (1 Sam 12:13) Others said: "We have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves". They believed God should be the only king (1 Sam 12:19). The king: sent by God or human hubris? This is a question that has preoccupied people throughout the centuries. Saul, the first king of Israel, was finally rejected. He refused to kill the neighboring people of the Amalekites 'man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey' as it says in the Bible (1 Sam 15:3). King Saul was rejected because he felt mercy with his enemies and showed kindness. The Israelites were a remorseless and revengeful people like were the surrounding people too, and this mentality is also reflected in their image of God, the image of a remorseless God that from today's perspective is hard to swallow.

Saul's successor and the most famous kings of all was David. We know King David from various paintings and theatre plays, and his poetry and songs in the Book of Psalms became famous. The context of David's reign is a transition period within the history of Israel. We remember: the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. Under the leadership of Moses, they finally managed to flee the Pharaoh's oppression. Forty years of migration through the desert followed until they finally found a place to settle down. Because of the lawlessness of this period there was a growing desire to have a king. The Israelites were hoping for strong leadership over their enemies and for wealth.

David is both, a historic figure and a biblical legend. His kingdom was hardly as great as it is described in the Bible, but he paved the way for future kings. Jerusalem was a very small place, far from the golden city it later became. Geopolitically Jerusalem was rather unimportant, and so was David. He was certainly an important leader figure for his people,

but not really a challenge for the surrounding peoples as it is described in the Bible. However, he legitimates the subsequent rise of the Israelites to wealth and power - a little bit like William Tell in Switzerland.

So who was this David, the great king of Israel? Who was this man who was later exalted as the founding father of the kingdom of Israel?

David was the youngest of eight brothers. He is described as a handsome yet rather small and soft boy. His brothers were much stronger than him and influential in the local community. One day Samuel, the main priest, was called to the household of Jesse to appoint the next king. God would lead him to recognise the future king among Jesse's sons. Each of them walked past Samuel, and each time Samuel thought: "This one looks quite strong and powerful. Surely he must be the new king." But God kept telling him that he was wrong. So after all seven sons of Jesse have passed before Samuel, he said: "God has not chosen any of these. Is there another son?" So Jesse had to call for his youngest son who was out in the fields keeping the sheep. When Samuel saw the small, handsome shepherd he immediately knew that the future king was standing in front of him.

The chosen one was not one of the influential brothers, strong and self-confident. Quite the opposite: the chosen one was the least among the brothers: David the shepherd who spent his time in the fields and who was also a gifted poet. He was a free spirit rather than a political strategist. God said to Samuel: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature. God does not see like men see. They look on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart."

It is a beautiful story. The least of the brothers, the shepherd, becomes the greatest of all. In our modern city context, this would be the cleaner, the nurse, the sewer, the carer: the people who do the hidden yet hugely important tasks that are hardly recognised in public life. However, we know all too well that reality is often not like this. We hear that God lifts up the least among us. We read that last will be the first, but then so often in our lives, the last remains the last. For long periods and still today, the church has forgotten about this biblical message. The church became an institution for the powerful.

This week, a dear friend of mine passed away at the grand old age of 97 years. I met Ruth shortly after her 90th birthday and stayed at her flat in Basel many times discussing politics, religion and life in general. She was a figure of wisdom, a mentor and full of humour and positivity. Ruth was one of the first women Ministers to be ordained in the reformed church of Switzerland. Born to Christian missionaries in the mission house in Basel, she grew up in a very strict household. She was brought up knowing her role as a girl and woman in society. Studying was not part of the programme, and yet she knew very soon that she wanted to study theology and become a church minister which at the time was not possible for women. She did all the things she wasn't supposed to do: skiing, going on holidays with her friends, and she convinced her father that she could study theology. Even after her ordination in the 1940ies, she was at first not allowed to lead a parish. Only in 1960 did the reformed church of Basel appoint ordained women into ministry. She went on to empower other women across Europe to go their own way against the odds and the restrictions of their churches.

Structures and circumstances will always bring advantage for some and disadvantage for others and there are indeed things we cannot change from one day to the next. Some changes take generations. I often hear people say: "I can't do this or I can't do that because no one supports me or tells me what to do." Some things are indeed very hard, almost impossible to change. But much more often, people do not even try. It is so easy to take the people or structures around us as an excuse.

Slavery was for a long time considered normal. That a person could be another person's property was common sense and perfectly legal. Yet there were people who were determined to change this, and after a long, long fight, slavery was finally abolished.

Women for a long time were considered second class citizens, and in many parts of the world still are. No right to vote, no right to work without their husband's permission. Yet there were people who were determined to change this, and eventually women were granted the same rights as men.

Today, heterosexual relationships are still considered the norm and almost everywhere in the world, heterosexual couples have more rights than homosexual couples. Yet this is slowly changing because there are people determined to change this.

If women rights and anti-slavery campaigners would have said: 'I can't do this because the system is against me' nothing would ever have happened. Many of these campaigners have never seen the result of their efforts. They did in the hope that future generations will see change.

David was the least among the brothers, and yet he was the one who became king. He was made invisible by his father and was sent far away from his brothers to keep the sheep in the fields. Yet David became visible. He rose to be the king and led the Israelites to wealth and strength. He single-handedly defeated the much stronger and better armed Goliath. The reason he defeated him was not his strength or his army or his weapon. The reason he defeated him was because he tried. Sheer determination and a strong vision can make things possible that we never thought would change. It might not happen today or tomorrow. It might even take generations. Yet this is no reason not to take a first step onto the path of justice.

God does not judge the outer appearance like humans do. God judges what is in the heart: our fire, our determination and our willingness to try even when the path ahead of us seems long and rocky.

Amen