



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 18th September 2005
by Mark Ashton

10p

1 Samuel chapter 12:1-13:15

How do I stand with God?

Introduction

“How do I stand with God?” I guess that is not a question which bothers a great many people much of the time: How do I stand with God? But it is a question that every one asks themselves at least once, sooner or later, at some point in their lives.

Perhaps, in our relativist age, we prefer to put it the other way round: - “How does God stand with me? What do I make of God?” We are so accustomed to standing in the centre of the stage of our lives that we find it very hard to think that there might actually be someone else in that position. There used to be a limerick about an Oxford philosophy don which went:

There was a young don, who said, “God
Must find it exceedingly odd,
If He thinks that this tree
will continue to be,
When there’s no one about in the Quad”

(‘quad’ being the term they use for ‘court’ in that benighted university). And that bit of doggerel elicited a quick response (probably penned here in Cambridge).

Dear Sir, Your astonishment’s odd,
I am always about in the Quad.
And that’s why the tree
Will continue to be,
Since observed by, yours faithfully, God.

You see, if there is a God (and I know that not all of us here tonight will necessarily be convinced of that at the moment)...if there is a God, then reality must be determined by reference to Him. If there is no god, then all I have to go on is myself. And I have no way at all of telling if my perception of truth is better or worse than anyone else’s. At the end of the day, if there is no God, all notions of absolute truth, of right and wrong, fly out of the window (they just become a matter of opinion), and selfishness (self fulfilment/actualization) will rule. And that alternative is one of the many pointers that direct us towards the existence of God (a possibility to which I trust you are open) and to asking the question: If there is a God, Where do I stand with Him?

And our Bible passage tonight (from a rather obscure bit of the Old Testament, 1 Samuel) provides us with 2 contrasting figures who will help us to answer that question for ourselves. (These great metaphysical issues, like: is there a God? And where do I stand with Him? are often best tackled on a personal level—by considering actual people, and asking, in the light of how that person lived, how, then, am I going to live my life?) So let’s consider these two men, from about 3,000 years ago: An Israelite prophet, Samuel, and the first Israelite King, Saul. Let’s take King Saul first—

1. Saul

And it is hard not to have a lot of sympathy for Saul in this story. He had been made Israel's first King, somewhat reluctantly, at a time of political crisis—look at 1 Samuel 13:5-9: *The Philistines assembled to fight Israel, with three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They went up and camped at Micmash, east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. So he said, "Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings." And Saul offered up the burnt offering.* They had made Saul king so that Israel could have decisive leadership in the face of enemy threat. What could the poor guy do? *Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him. "What have you done?" asked Samuel. Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD's favour.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering."* *"You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command"* (vv 10-14).

Now, it was not that Saul had trespassed on Samuel's preserve by offering the sacrifices himself, nor that he was trying to ignore God in the situation. No, the problem was that Saul felt he had to take the initiative. He reckoned he needed to be in the driving seat.

When you teach your children to drive, one of the hardest things is not them picking up the necessary skills, but you relinquishing the necessary control. Even long after they have passed their test and clocked up hundreds of miles of solo driving, you can still find yourself trying to press your foot through the floor of the car on an imaginary brake pedal as they drive you. But you have to let them take control.

I once had a lesson piloting a light aircraft. It was in a small plane called a Condor, and you sat side-by-side with the instructor, with an identical set of controls in front of each of you. He taught me a little drill we were to observe as we flew: he would say to me when I was going to fly the plane, "You have control"; and I was to reply, "I have control", and he would respond "You have control". It was to be the same when I handed the plane back to him: "You have control". "I have control." "You have control". It is vital to know who is in control of a light aeroplane. There can be no ambiguity. And there can be no ambiguity if a human being is going to have a relationship with the God Who made us. He has to have control.

Are you trying to relate to God on a different basis to that? Do you have problems with that? With the idea of handing over control of your life to someone else? Then think to yourself what kind of a God am I prepared to deal with? Is He not big enough to be trusted with control of my life? Or am I so great in my own estimation that I cannot conceive of anyone in the universe big enough to have the right to take control of my life? Do you want the real God? Or a pet god of your own imaging—small enough to let you keep control?

Now, Saul decided to retain the initiative in his relationship with God. It was not that he was irreligious or unconscientious. But for him God was a problem that he had to solve, and so he decided for himself how he would please God. Is that how you approach God? As a problem that you must solve for yourself? So, somehow I must make myself right with God—by being good enough or religious enough, or sincere enough, or even by believing enough?

2. Samuel

Now, Samuel provides a very different model for us. Notice that for Samuel as well, God is a problem: Samuel confronted the Israelites with all God's goodness to them. See 12:7: *Now then, stand here, because I am going to confront you with evidence before the LORD as to all the righteous acts performed by the LORD for you and your fathers*, and then with all their disobedience to God's will for them (in the verses we

skipped from the chapter). But then he goes on: ***“Do not be afraid,” Samuel replied. “You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away”*** (12:20-25); ***“Do not be afraid,” Samuel replied. “You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart*** (v 20). God may be the problem—because He is absolute goodness: and you and I make a sorry mess of trying to be good in our lives. But the solution does not lie in turning away from God—whether we turn away in order to try to ignore Him (and some of us do that) or try to set our houses in order by our own efforts before coming back to Him (and plenty of us do that). The solution lies in God Himself.

Eddie Izzard has pointed out that the safest thing to do if someone is trying to shoot you with a bazooka, or a rocket launcher, is to hug them! Similarly, the great Scottish missionary to the New Hebrides David Brainerd, when he was threatened by an angry islander with a spear or a musket, used to stand right up face-to-face with them, so they could not bring the weapon to bear on him. Those are feeble illustrations. But when it comes to God, He is our greatest threat and our only hope. He is the worst problem you and I ever face in our lives, and He is its only solution. We must not turn from Him. We must turn to Him, get as close as we can: ***“Do not be afraid,” Samuel replied. “You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart*** (v 20).

Both Saul and Samuel in their own ways prefigure someone else. Saul failed to be the leader after God’s own heart, whom God wished to send for His people (13:14). Samuel was a faithful pray-er and spokesman for God (12:23). But both point us forward to Jesus: God’s true King, perfect spokesman and ultimate mediator.

I do not have time tonight to explain Jesus to you properly, there will be a later opportunity for that... but Jesus is the reason that you and I can turn in safety to the holy God, Who is so threatening to us. A small child was once playing in the garden, when he began to cry out because a bee was buzzing around him. His mother hurried over and put her arms around him, and as she did so the child felt her suddenly wince with pain. Then she said, “It’s all right, darling. You’re quite safe now, the bee has stung me”. Jesus on the cross bore the penalty for my sins, so that I can be safe in His arms. When He puts His arms around me I sense that wince, that flinching, as He takes the shock of my sin. I cannot now be stung.

If that sounds an intriguing possibility, come again, or to Arena. If you fear you won’t keep your resolve to attend that course, come now to talk to me—give me your phone number and I’d love to remind you nearer the time!

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)