

Overview of the Old Testament: The United Kingdom
Preaching Notes for Sunday May 26th

Slide 1	<p>Good morning! Really great to be here and grateful for the invitation. Am a bit between things at the moment so it's been great to have a few Sundays to re-connect with places and people that have been such an important part of my journey in God and in ministry and this is another one of those! It's good to review and reflect on where we've been, what has made us the people we are today.</p> <p><i>Link to OT Overview</i></p> <p>I think that's part of the purpose of undertaking this series overviewing the Old Testament through May and June because of course this is a large part of our story. It forms the backdrop and the foundation for our identity as Christians, as people walking in relationship with the Living God. The OT gives us the benefit of about 1400 years of experience or ordinary people, like me and you, working out what it means, in their times and circumstances, to relate to God and to others – both those if you like within the community of faith and those outside of it.</p> <p>So, many of the OT themes are just as relevant today as they ever were . I'm hoping we'll see that this morning as we explore the particular period of Israel's history referred to as the United Kingdom or perhaps more accurately United Monarchy. This era spans a period of about 120 years, incorporating the reigns of the first three kings of Israel – Saul, David and Solomon.</p> <p>To journey through this in the Bible, you would need to start in 1 Samuel 8 – where Israel first requests a king and continue through the rest of 1 and 2 Samuel into first Kings and the reign of Solomon which has been described as the Beginning of the End of the United Kingdom. It's in 1 Kings 12 that the divide between the Northern and Southern kingdoms, which has actually always been lingering in the background becomes permanent. The final division is mainly the result of some very rash, impetuous and ill-advised decision making by the young king Rehoboam, Solomon's Son – but I'll leave that exciting installment for the speaker next week!</p>
Slide 2	<p>Just to mention a couple of resources along the way if you want to take this further. Encountering the Old Testament is a very accessible overview of all of the books of the Old Testament and their main themes. Also gives helpful pointers to further reading and study questions if you like that sort of approach. The Bible in One Year is a fabulous resource produced by Holy Trinity Brompton. You can</p>

	<p>either read or listen to a portion of Psalms, Old Testament and New Testament for each day with some short commentary and application in between. Makes a great start to the day and highlights common links and themes between the Old Testament and the New.</p>
Slide 3	<p>The famous preacher and evangelist D.L. Moody said: <i>‘The Bible was not given to increase our knowledge but to change our lives’</i> and that’s my prayer for this morning. That we go away from this time today not just more knowledgeable about this particular part of the Old Testament but that our lives will be formed and shaped for the better by the lessons we learn from it. I think God might be asking us particularly today to reflect on where the heart of our identity and security is - personally, and as a church community called to be a light in this particular part of our world. What are the strongest influences on our choices and decisions in life? What is it that truly unites us? Let’s take a moment to pray now</p>
Slide 4	<p>I know we’re in the Old Testament, but let me introduce you to Lazarus. Now some of you may be wondering what a wardrobe has to do with the United Kingdom of Israel in ancient history but I promise you there is a link! There is good precedent after all for wardrobes leading to the discovery of wider worlds!</p> <p>As some of you know, I have just moved house and this is my old, faithful wardrobe which I have nicknamed Lazarus because he is now on his fourth resurrection, having been dismantled and reassembled four times through various moves over the last 5/6 years. On the day I moved, the removal men came to me at about 5 pm with a very grave look on their faces and explained that they didn’t think Lazarus could survive another resurrection – they were afraid that if they put him together again the whole thing would collapse. I took pity on them and let them go home but my Dad and brother had more faith that Lazarus could indeed be brought back to life again, though I had to promise them that this really would be the final time of asking!</p> <p>See what I love about Lazarus is that he’s 3 pieces of furniture united in one – perfect! But he has taken a bit of a bashing over the years and this time a piece of him even got lost in the move, so putting him back together this time was even more tricky than usual. I am incredibly thankful for my Dad’s skill and patience! Have you got any glue? He said to me as cracking started to appear around some of Lazarus’s old joints. I had a slight panic at that point – I knew in the midst of the move I could lay my hands on where the Pritt Stick was,</p>

	<p>but Pritt stick wasn't going to cut it. Holding this thing together was more than a Pritt Stick job. It needed Superglue. Having the right kind of glue was essential to keep the piece intact.</p> <p>And I would argue that, as we arrive at 1 Samuel Chapter 8 in the OT, the nation of Israel is looking for glue, some kind of glue which is going to hold them together and make them stronger as a nation moving forward into the future. I don't really want to dwell on the 'B' word this morning, but with our own politics at present and over the last few years we could I think draw quite a few parallels here. What is the glue that holds us together as a United Kingdom. What is and what will be our identity through and beyond this period of transition? Where does our security lie? Let's have a look at Israel's request for a national 'glue'</p>
Slide 5	<p>We're going to turn first to 1 Samuel. I'm wondering whether perhaps our Prime Minister in this week might feel a bit like Samuel. As we come to this passage in 1 Samuel Chapter 8, the clock is ticking and the equivalent of the 1922 Committee/Cabinet in Israel are getting increasingly anxious about the future. So they come to Samuel with this request (read text in 1 Samuel 8: 4-5). Now pragmatically this might seem quite a reasonable request. But the question we need to ask is, is this request for a king, however good an idea it seems, really a GOD idea? Is it really something God is putting God's stamp of approval on? Is a human king really going to be the glue that makes for a United Kingdom? Let's have a look first at what is motivating this request, what are the influences behind it?</p>
Slide 6	<p>It seems to me there are three main motivators behind this request for a king. The first is the <u>Vacuum</u> the nation seems to be staring in the face, both in political and spiritual terms. I think last week you were looking at the period of Conquest and Judges in the life of Israel. Judges ends with that sense of moral and spiritual free for all 'everyone doing what seemed right in their own eyes'. In Samuel (prophet and priest), God raised up someone who could bring back a sense of cohesion as someone who listened carefully to God, as someone who could bring God's word and guidance back into the picture. But Samuel can't last forever and sadly his immediate heirs don't have the same walk with God or the same integrity he had.</p> <p>So there's uncertainty about the future and a leadership crisis (again we can probably hear some bells ringing here!). There's also FEAR. The uncertainty itself generates fear, but in addition to that, the nations around Israel, particularly the Ammonites and Philistines are growing stronger and more aggressive. Israel's security seems under</p>

threat. The northern tribes of Israel in particular realise they need to unite against this increasing threat.

Finally, and most telling of all in the request, is this desire to have a king so that Israel can be just like all the other nations around it – a desire to conform . Perhaps there's envy here too – they have something we don't. I wonder, if we're honest, how much our decisions and choices in life are influenced by these factors (vacuum, fear and conformity) too - both personally and corporately. Maybe we feel a sense of lack in life in some area, like we're missing out on something others have – there's even a term for that now isn't there FOMO – Fear of Missing Out. We are so prone to compare ourselves with others and find we are wanting in one way or another. But it seems to me that those areas we might consider to be a vacuum in our lives are often the spaces God can fill and work through most powerfully, often in ways which may not be obvious at first. Wherever we feel a vacuum, the challenge is to trust and allow GOD to fill the space rather than trying to apply our own Pritt Stick solution and fill it with other things.

Slide 7

Israel seemed to have come to the conclusion that a king would be the answer to all their problems. A king, so they thought, would be the 'glue' that could fix things that were broken in their society, give them the security they craved and pull the different tribes together. But the writer of 1 Samuel makes it very clear that human kingship was never God's idea. Why? Because of course Israel already had a king! God was their king. Samuel tells them in no uncertain terms that to ask for a human king is actually rejecting God as the king they already have.

In Grand Prix terms it might be something like the equivalent of having Lewis Hamilton gifted to your team for free and then saying, actually we'd prefer Gail to drive – I promise you, it's very much a Pritt Stick solution! Monarchy was never God's ideal because God had already put superglue in place to hold the nation of Israel, God's people together. God's idea for a United Kingdom was always based on COVENANT – right from way back with Abraham in Genesis: 'I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you so that all peoples on earth can be blessed through you'. The promise is already there.

You can see some of the differences between Covenant and Kingship up there on the screen. One of the first things Samuel stresses to the people is that, if you seriously want a king, there will be a new contract – you'll have to give a portion of everything you have to the king. Instead of holding responsibility as a community for seeking God's will and guidance, so much of the nation's future will be determined by the quality of the one person who holds the office of king.

We see that time and time again listed for us in 1 and 2 Kings. So and so became king and if they were faithful to God's ways things went well – but sadly the majority weren't very faithful and the whole nation suffered as a result.

This human system is the wrong kind of glue and the fact that they want to do this so that they can be like everyone else should have been the biggest clue of all that it might not be the right way forward. The whole point and purpose of the nation of Israel through the OT is that they are supposed to be DIFFERENT, DISTINCTIVE from the nations around them.

It's the Covenant relationship itself that makes them unlike any other nation. God's idea was never that a United Kingdom of Israel would exist for its own sake or benefit. The idea was that Israel, in walking faithfully in its covenant relationship with God, would be a light to other nations, would be so attractive in its alternative way of working as a community that other nations would sit up and notice and be drawn to that way of life. And that remains a calling and a challenge for all of us – that Jesus in us would shine in such a way that others notice the difference and start to ask questions. So if we're motivated by a desire to conform, or we're crippled by unhelpful comparisons with others, let's allow God rather to TRANSFORM us, to celebrate those very things that are unique about living a life wrapped up in the love and grace of God for all to see.

Slide 8

Martin Luther King once spoke about the church needing to recover something of what the early Christians had in being a thermostat rather than a thermometer. A thermometer simply records and reflects the temperature of its environments, whereas a thermostat transforms it.

In the same way, the mission of the OT nation of Israel and for the church was not simply to conform to its surroundings but to change the atmosphere, to bring about some positive climate change, to make an imprint and an impact on society – a Jesus' shaped footprint. I wonder

	<p>how we might see that happen where God has strategically placed us. Maybe it's about taking a conversation in a different direction, maybe it's about restoring a relationship, maybe it's about finding kindness over criticism, maybe it's about persevering with that person we would just much rather avoid – where and how might God be using us to be a thermostat.</p> <p>As much as I want to avoid the B word, I can't help feeling that this just might be an opportunity for the church to model something different, to be a beacon in the face of so much uncertainty and division (story re Tesco and praying re Brexit). The key thing is we have to find the glue in God and not in those quick fix solutions which might at first seem appealing. This is a challenge for the church I think because it's so tempting to grasp hold of the latest top tip for church growth and think 'if we just go for that we'll be ok'. And of course we can learn from each other and what has worked well in other places. But we still have to do that ground work of listening carefully to God to hear what he might be saying for here, for this place at this time and in this particular community – otherwise we're in danger of applying the Pritt Stick rather than the Super Glue.</p>
Slide 9	<p>So we could say that kingship as the means to a United Kingdom of Israel was a Concession from God rather than a Calling. Even though it's not God's idea, God gives the people what they ask for. We may want to think about that in terms of how we pray – asking for what we WANT may not be the same thing as asking for what is God's best for us and, if God gives us what we want, we may just end up with more than we'd bargained for!</p> <p>But the story of the United Kingdom of Israel, of that early period of kingship, is yet another story of the grace of God. The amazing grace of God that works with, reshapes and transforms even our poor decisions and choices to make something good of them, to redeem them when we allow them to be like clay in God's potter hands. Saul's kingship starts well but goes to his head and ends badly – it's a lesson in not judging a person's suitability for leadership from their outward appearance. It's through David that the kingdom unites, (although this does take some time. Saul has a son, Ishbosheth who is recognized as king by the Northern Tribes whilst David is adopted king by the Southern Tribes. There are two years of civil war before eventually Ishbosheth is killed by two of his own commanders and David is recognized as king of the whole nation). David becomes the iconic king figure because, at least to begin with, his heart is in the right place with God. But even for a king who starts as well as David, personal sin and its repercussions put the unity of the nation under</p>

serious threat from members of his own family, his own sons rebel against him.

Nevertheless, the kingdom remains united and under Solomon enjoys its greatest era of peace, security and international influence. But then again Solomon's own personal lack of faithfulness to God, despite the gift of wisdom he was given, results in the collapse of the United Kingdom as soon as his son Rehoboam succeeds him. I would argue that this is all because the kingdom is being held together by the wrong kind of glue – the monarch has become the focus instead of God.

But all this does point us to where the full promise of a united kingdom truly lies – where God is centre stage through a king who shares our humanity but succeeds where everyone else has failed in living in complete faithfulness to God's covenant, fulfilling it in every way. In the grace of God, Jesus becomes the true Unitor in the Kingdom of God – he becomes the super glue that mends the broken relationship between God and all of us as human beings at the cross. The ancient united kingdom of Israel was just a poor shadow of it, but Jesus as King was most definitely God's idea for uniting a kingdom incorporating people of every race, background and language and that's the inheritance we can all enjoy, we can all be part of and we can all invite others to. That is truly a United Kingdom to be hopeful about and look forward to! Amen!