

6pm Evensong Sunday 21st June 2026

1 Samuel 24:1-17 and Luke 14:12-24 – ***The king who did not seek to save himself, but offered up his life to bring about peace***

One of the most enduring images from the coronation of King Charles III must surely be the sight of the King having been divested of all his regalia until he was wearing only a plain linen shirt, ready to be anointed as King. Even now, we know what a serious thing it is to be anointed as King. Robert Harris's novelisation, *Act of Oblivion*, told the story of the hunting down of those who were held accountable for the regicide of our current King's namesake Charles I, and who therefore were not pardoned in the Indemnity and Oblivion Act of 1660. To kill the one who has been anointed King is not simply to be a disrupter of history. It is to threaten the established order at its very heart.

But what if there are two men who can claim to have been anointed King? What then?

That is the context for our Old Testament reading. There is civil war in Israel, because both Saul and David have been anointed by Samuel to be King of Israel.

Saul was anointed King by Samuel. Saul was ***a handsome young man, ... who stood head and shoulders above everyone else***, son of a wealthy Benjaminite, who had been anointed King by Samuel, who ***all Israel ... knew was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord***. And God said to Samuel ***you shall anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel [and] he shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines for I have seen the suffering of my people [and] their outcry has come to me***.

But David has also been anointed King by Samuel. The youngest son of Jesse the Bethlehemite; the one who was keeping the sheep when Samuel came looking for the King that he was supposed to anoint in place of Saul; David is perhaps a less obvious choice than Saul. But this time God had said to Samuel ***Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart***.

And in our Old Testament reading, we can see for ourselves why it is David's heart that makes him a better King than Saul.

Saul had become increasingly unbalanced about David's growing success in battle, which had long eclipsed Saul's own success in battle, to the point that David's wife Michal had to let David down through a window so that he could flee from assassins, sent by Saul to kill him. David has been on the run from Saul ever since; initially south to Moab, then to the forest of Hereth, then north to Keilah, then to the hill country in the wilderness of Ziph, then to live in the strongholds of the wilderness of En-gedi. Saul has been seeking David every day. There have been very many close shaves where it looked as if ***Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them***, but each time, ***the Lord did not give David into Saul's hand***, because something, or somebody, intervened.

In our reading we get a glimpse of why David is going to be a better King than Saul. It seems that Saul and his ***three thousand chosen men out of all Israel*** are closer than they have ever been to finding and defeating David and his men, who are ***sitting in the innermost parts of the cave*** into which Saul just happens to venture, looking for a place where he can ***relieve himself***. And David's men say to David ***This is***

it! This is your chance! This is the day! And at first, it seems that David thinks the same. ***David went and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's cloak.***

But then, and given what happened next, it can't have been very long afterwards, ***David [is] stricken to the heart because he had cut off a corner of Saul's cloak.*** David is conscience-stricken because he knows he has deliberately exercised power over Saul, the anointed king, and symbolically taken away something of Saul's royalty. David understands that he can only wear the royal robes if he is given them by God, and not by snatching at them for himself. David still sees himself as being in the service of Saul, his anointed king. And here, in a nutshell, is why David is a better King than Saul.

Not just because David is a gifted leader and diplomat, who begins with an extravagant gesture, ***[bowing] with his face to the ground and [doing] obeisance.*** David challenges Saul: ***Why do you listen to the words of those who say "David seeks to do you harm?"***, reminding him of what Saul has seen ***this very day [with your own eyes]***. David then wisely points out to Saul that ***the Lord gave you into my hand in the cave; and some urged me to kill you, but I spared you, because I will not raise my hand against [the one who] is the Lord's anointed.***

David is a better King, not just because David is the one who can re-fashion his own, much-regretted, action not as a sign that he would bring Saul down, but instead as a signifier of his great loyalty to Saul, so that suddenly, it is Saul who should be forgiving David, rather than the other way around, and Saul the one who accepts that it is David who is ***the more righteous*** because he has ***repaid [Saul with] good, whereas [Saul] has repaid [David] with evil.***

And if David is a better King than Saul, it is not just because David is the one who can challenge Saul to see that to see David as a threat is as ridiculous as feeling threatened by ***a single flea*** on the carcass of ***a dead dog***. No, David is a better King than Saul because ***David has the better heart.*** David is a better King, because he has a clear sense of God having a purpose which is bigger than David himself; one which David must honour and must live by.

And David is a better King than Saul because David responds to the guiding of God, even though to do so means reversing his original course of action, at the risk of his own personal authority. David is open to whatever it is that God might be guiding him towards, and willing to follow wherever God might be leading him, come what may. Although David is tempted to use the power that he has been given over Saul, David's first and foremost concern is that Saul is the Lord's anointed. David will not be tempted to set that fact aside, despite the pressure that David's own men place on him to do so.

And finally, David is a better King than Saul because he is prepared to chance his own security, for the sake of pursuing peace, and is willing, even, to call Saul ***my father.***

The Israelites believed that David was their greatest ever King. But we can see why David is the forerunner for the one who was and is the greatest King of all. The King who resisted the temptation to use his power to bring down his enemies. The King on the cross, who heard the shouts of ***"if you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"*** and who said ***"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"***. The King who willingly offered up his own life, so that humanity might know the peace of being reconciled with God.