

1 Samuel 8:1-22 focus verse 1 Cor. 3:23

With my niece visiting from Miyazaki, our family had the privilege of being able to spend a day at Tokyo Disney Sea. Even though it was too cold to be outside all day, and most of the day was spent standing in line, we had a good time. I especially enjoyed watching all the people. Not only did people wear Mickey Mouse ears, and funny hats with assorted things like stuffed pigs stuck on them, they dressed up that way in groups! I don't know, maybe for some it would have been too embarrassing to wear a crazy hat alone, but when you have a whole group doing it, it's probably easier. It definitely unites a group to wear the same costumes. The other thing I noticed was how the whole crowd of spectators cheered as Mickey and friends came by on a boat. All the characters on the boat were dancing, clapping, and cheering to music, and many of the spectators as well. I remember Rie making a comment about how amazing it would be if our worship services would be celebrations like that. Can you imagine? People cheering, music, and dancing...?

It got me thinking about how we all have a need to belong. Everyone needs a sense of belonging to a family, a group of friends, a group of co-workers, to a church... We find fulfilment, knowing that we are not alone. Especially in larger cities, even surrounded by people, there are those who feel very alone, with nowhere to belong. They feel like they don't fit in anywhere. As a result, some may join a gang and get involved in criminal activity, just to fulfil that need to belong.

In 1st Corinthians chapter three, the Apostle Paul says that we belong to God... When we forget that, we face many problems. We were created by God, but because of sin in our lives, we were not able to have a good relationship with God. So, God sent Jesus (the Son of God) to help us see God's way. Jesus showed us the power of God's love for us, by his death on the cross, and by his resurrection. Through Jesus, God has now taken away our sin. We belong because we were created by God, but we also belong because we are part of God's spiritual family, through the work of Jesus Christ. The meaning of this is described in 1st Peter, chapter two, starting in verse 9, "...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people, once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." We are all children of God. But, do we realise this? If we really believe this, it will change our lives.

In addition to our need for belonging, I thought about how we are created with a need to worship. Most of the Psalms encourage us to worship God. The Israelites were encouraged and instructed on how best to worship God. And, in the book of Revelation, we see many scenes where all creation is worshipping God. God is worthy of our praise for all that God has done for us. Through worshipping God, we find fulfilment. If we do not worship God, there is something important missing from our lives. If we do not worship God, we will end up worshipping things or people, idols instead of the one true God. Our object of worship may be a favourite musician, a movie star, a great leader, or it may be a thing like Mickey Mouse.

Today, we read from the book of 1st Samuel chapter eight. It's a story of a group of people shifting their focus from God to human leaders. In this scene we see the elders of Israel asking Samuel, to appoint a king for them, so that they can "be like other nations." Up until that time, Israel had been led by judges, people who were chosen by God, often to lead for short times during times of crisis. At that time, Samuel was the judge. It was a fairly long story that we read, but the main point is simple. The Israelites wanted a king so that they could be like the surrounding nations. Samuel is not happy with their request, and he brings the problem to God. We may wonder what's so wrong about wanting a king. God's response to Samuel gives us an idea. Starting in verse seven, God says, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you."

To have a king, in itself, is not wrong – just like it’s not necessarily wrong to have a celebration together, cheering on Micky Mouse. What is wrong, though, is to forget about God and change our focus to these other people and things in our lives... The Israelites were asking for a human king. That meant that they wanted to move away from God being their king, in order to be more like the surrounding nations. The surrounding nations were not followers of God. It was a move away from God.

I wondered why people are drawn away from God, focusing more and more on people and on things that we feel are important. I believe one reason is that to focus on God, we need faith. We cannot see God, and we may desire the assurance that comes with being able to see the one who is leading you. The Israelites were a relatively small nation of people. They needed to trust in God to protect them from the surrounding nations with huge armies and a lot of power. Out of fear, they wanted a human king to lead them. That would take less faith. A thousand years later, God came to live on earth. In human form, Jesus showed us the clearest image of God. Yet, people didn’t expect him to be from God. Jesus was the King of kings, and yet was put on trial with people shouting, “We have no king but Caesar!”

We easily slip into thinking it’s safer to put our trust in people and even in ourselves rather than in God. God often challenges us. We don’t always know what to expect. Where is our trust? I’d just like to take a moment to think about this. Most followers of Jesus Christ will say that they trust in God more than people. I would say that, myself. But, during this time of Lent, I’ve been thinking more deeply about my own sin, trying to understand those areas that I hide even to myself. Of course, I trust in God more than in people. But then, why am I sometimes worried about what I’m going to say, or why do I sometimes worry about decisions I need to make? If I truly trust in God all the time, I won’t be overly worried because God is almighty and can lead me through any situation, even if there is pain along the way. 1st John 4:18 says that “Perfect love casts out fear...” If we are filled with God’s love, we’ll not need to be overly fearful. If we look hard to find where our fears come from, we may be able to see where we lack the love of God. We may see where our trust is lacking.

When we substitute someone or something else for God, we don’t always see right away how this causes problems. Samuel warns the Israelites of all the difficulties they’d have if they got a king. In order to build up armies, we read “he will take your sons...”. To be perfumers, cooks, and bakers, “he will take your daughters.” “He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards...” Notice how that continues in this description of a king. The king will take, he will take, take and take. What a contrast to God, whose is known as a giver. Ultimately, God gave the world his only Son, Jesus, that we can experience God’s love, grace, and forgiveness through him.

Even after the warning, the Israelites continue to ask for a human king. So, God finally lets them. If we read on, we see that the first king, king Saul, turns out to be a terrible king. Notice that God doesn’t stop them from having a king. God gives them the freedom to do what they like, but they would then experience the natural consequences of their decision. Though, after that, God doesn’t just give up on them. God continues to lead and encourage them from that point. God then helps them choose David who, for the most part, turns out to be a good king.

So, where is your allegiance? Who or what takes priority in your life? Are you looking for security in something other than God? I’d like to leave you with a challenge written by the author, Henri Nouwen. He writes,

‘To whom do I belong? To God or to the world?’ Many of my daily preoccupations suggest that I belong more to the world than to God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me. ... I am like a small boat on the ocean, completely at the mercy of its waves. Paul says in Ephesians 4, from verse 14, “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...”

Let's recommit to putting our trust in Christ and let all our other important things move to lower priorities. I invite you to pray with me now.

Almighty God, you are the creator of the world. We praise you for all you have done. We confess that we have not always put you first in our lives. So easily, we slip into worries about ourselves, or we focus on human leaders to give us confidence rather than trusting in you. Forgive us, Lord. All around us we see the results of people who live in fear rather than trusting in you. We pray for those who are suffering in Ukraine because of the war. We pray for those around the world who are suffering because of political conflicts. May there be peace. Grant us the courage to trust in you, to take action to follow your leading, sharing your love with those around us. May all our other priorities be shaped by our relationship with you, through Christ our Lord, Amen.