

1 Kings 12:1-24 Jeroboam and Rehoboam

Luke 19:37-44 Jesus cries over Jerusalem

Are we living in a kingdom divided against itself?

At the last Messy Church that we did here, one of the activities related to 'getting lost' and involved building mazes with Lego for a marble to run through. Each maze had to have a route through, but also blind alleys and dead ends. One child cleverly put a ramp in the through route making it look like it was the wrong way to go. But, when you took time to talk to the child, it became clear that the marble had to roll over the ramp, from where there would be no going back, just the need to continue on the last twists and turns required to reach its destination. Other parts of the model could have in fact been dismantled, but this difficult route needed to remain.

Our Old and New Testament readings today are a bit like that ramp. They are a necessary obstruction in the route to understanding the direction of God's plan for the world. They also bring us up short and make us think about our own relationship with God, and whether we are checking that it is heading in the right direction.

The height of Israel's power as a united kingdom under Saul and David was over. The famed wisdom of Solomon had lapsed when he enslaved his own people, prioritised his love-life over the worship of God and sacrificed faithfulness before idols (1 Sam 11:7-8). As Samuel had clearly foreseen at Saul's coronation (1 Sam 12:14-15), a faithless lack of obedience required God's judgement. God's plan to reveal his Kingdom in and through Jesus needed a new approach.

Jeroboam was a rebel, but a rebel responding to the promptings of a prophet, a man still faithfully listening to God. If you read 1 Kings 11:26-40 you'll find that the northern Kingdom was formed as God started to dismantle the pieces of his model kingdom. Confusingly known as Israel through this next era of its history, this kingdom of ten tribes would survive initially due to the economic wealth of its fertile agricultural lands, and then perish once again because of its inability to remain faithful to God, and its vulnerability to the greed of more powerful neighbours.

Rehoboam, the ruler of Jerusalem, was the son of Solomon and therefore of the House of David, which would remain the focus of God's route to revealing his love for the whole world. Left with the tribes of Judah (from which this southern nation would take its name) and Benjamin, his response to Israel's attempts at bribing humility from Judah tries to be brutal. But again a man who is still listening to

God speaks, and Judah is turned away from killing those with whom they had been so recently and closely associated.

As a unified nation, the old Israel had taken itself up a blind alley in its desire for a king. Rather than a king who ruled under God, they had manufactured kings who acted in their own paranoid self-interest and greed. Even after exile in Babylon, restoration, and then subjugation under Rome, the leaders of God's people would still selfishly seek to lead people on a labyrinthine route of legalistically-applied laws that were also just another dead-end.

However, God's work among the Israelites was never intended as the fulfilment of his promises. Rescue from Egypt was a limited redemption. The tabernacle and the temple were a shadow of God's presence with his people in Jesus. Israel's kings were but a poor foreshadowing of the Messiah. The partial kingdom, united or divided, was a sequence of temporary models of the kingdom that he sought to establish.

The presence of Jesus, weeping, at the conclusion of his 'triumphal' entry into Jerusalem, that suggests that once again God's way forward to the full, personal, redemptive relationship with his people has been blocked. Yet, face-to-face with the city that had already killed many Galilean prophets, in front of the Temple that had become a corrupt focal point of nationalistic ideology, Jesus wept not for

himself, but because people had once again failed in faith and obedience to God.

His calls for peace ignored, the gospel of God's grace and love for the whole world rejected, these were the tears of a sorrowful God poured out on the rejection of his own people. But that did not stop the blessings of their holy God being shed with and through the tears of God's very presence with his people, though they were too blind to notice. For this was the tipping point toward complete redemption. Here God's new kingdom was on the point of being established. Jesus wasn't just on the right route through the maze, he was at the top of the ramp. As soon as he stepped into the Temple to challenge the corruption and disobedience he knew was there, there was no going back.

There is much in all this talk of a kingdom divided against itself that in this particular week would lend itself to politically charged discussion. It would indeed be worth considering how and what extent, we ourselves may hold responsibility for the maze of inappropriate routes and dead-ends that our leaders appear to have constructed on our behalf and about a whole range of issues, not just the 'B-word'. And I'm sure Jesus is indeed weeping once again, over the utter carnage we have wrought because bitter fighting doesn't just use guns and missiles, and greed and corruption doesn't just starve the orphan but threatens to poison the vast majority of the temple of God's creation.

- But, have we considered the extent to which we allow God to have his kingdom within our own hearts and lives?
- How prone are we to being dazzled by the idols of fame and politics, or to despairing so much that we stop bothering to challenge both with love and grace?
- How divided are we in our own hearts and mind between making God and obedience to his ways our total priority, and the tendency to focus on the distractions of other people's choices, characters or idiosyncrasies?
- Are we fixated on things that prove to be dead-ends on the path God has set for us? And if so, what are they, and how can we set them aside?

The mazes we made at Messy related to the story of the lost sheep which was found. Jesus reached his destination with a purpose; to find us and redeem us, and the bits of us that still fail to live up to his promises and his presence with us even when we do profess faith in him. The sacrifice of the cross and the hope of the resurrection are wasted if we don't take seriously the love and grace with which they were offered. We are called to remember this whilst sharing in the body and blood of Jesus until he comes again in glory to offer God's final judgement. In the now and not yet of God's kingdom it is through our lives, our choices, and our words that people will experience being the destination of his love.