

## **WHO IS DRIVING YOUR BUS?**

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1 Samuel 8: 4-11, 16-20

So who do we want to be in charge? Who do we want to allow to be in control of our lives? There is a great prayer of self-dedication in our prayer book but when I've used it some have said, "Mark it's a great prayer, but that part about asking God to control our wills, well we're not so sure about that." The idea of truly surrendering our will to God makes all of us nervous. We want God to be in charge, but often do not wish to surrender our will to God. We want God to be in charge, but on our terms. This is the problem that Samuel is facing in this morning's reading.

Throughout the period prior to today's reading in 1 Samuel there were a series of judges, like Samson, Deborah and Gideon. When things started going wrong God would send the people a leader to help them through the tough times. Then things would settle down for a while. At the next crisis, God would provide a new judge to care for the people.

Samuel is in effect the last of the judges and great prophets of the period before the rise of the monarchy. Samuel is called by God and responds much like Isaiah did in last week's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. Now Samuel is an old man. Samuel became the prophet because the previous prophet Eli had two sons who were greedy, sinful men. God could not use them as a prophet and Eli knew it. Samuel's two sons are not any better so the people demand a king instead.

The people thought that this system of judges no longer worked and they might have been right. Rather than discern what God wanted they had come to their own conclusion. They look around and said, look at all these other countries, they have a king and we think we should too. However this was a huge change in how they wanted to

be governed and whom they wished to follow. They were looking to put their faith in human leadership.

Samuel is fearful about what a human king will be like, but the people are begging for this. Let us be like other nations with a king who will fight our wars and unify our people. Samuel knows full well that kings do not fight wars. Kings send others to fight wars, build temples etc. This is truly a case of be careful what you pray for, you just might get it!

Now please remember that the people believed that the king Samuel would select would function under God's authority. The divine right of kings was not yet a true part of the Jewish world, but they were certainly heading in that direction.

God finally says to Samuel, well this is what they want so I will give them what they ask for. The implication is that both God and Samuel know that soon the people will realize that they have made a big mistake.

This is such a common theme in the bible. We get in trouble and call on God for help. We put our lives in God's hands until things get better and then what do most of us do? We say, "Ok God now that I am out of trouble I will take charge again." Well at least until the next crisis when we dial 911 God for help again. In this case the people say, God help us and this is what we want you to do. How often do we pray to God for his help and guidance, but buried in that prayer is a very specific request. God please help us and this is how we want you do it and then provide a specific timetable just to be sure.

This is not really asking God for guidance, this is not putting God in charge. This is a case of "God, let my will be done." This is not the prayer that Jesus teaches where he teaches us to ask that God's will be done.

The problem is that letting the Spirit loose, to be in charge of our lives can be a messy business. Discerning what God is calling us to do is the prayer we should pray not telling God what we want.

Here is an example of what I am talking about. When I began my search for a new position in the fall of 2003 I met with the deployment officer for the Diocese of Massachusetts. We talked about my skills and interests and she said, "Well, there is a parish in suburban Boston that is looking for a rector. They had someone selected but he backed out at the last minute. I think you would be perfect for them." As it happened the rector who had retired from that parish had taken me out to lunch a year earlier to try to persuade me to apply for the job because she thought I was a perfect fit. Even better this church was close to a college that was looking for a campus chaplain that Wendy could apply for so I was sure this was the place. I began to pray please God I want this job

I interviewed and the vibes were good with the search committee. We even got so far as to talk about what day I would start. Then all of a sudden silence for a couple of weeks. My contact on the search committee told me that another member of the committee had a candidate that they wanted to interview. I continued to pray, "God, I really want this job." Ultimately they called the other priest and I was devastated.

After a couple of weeks I went back to the Church Deployment Office website. I decided to look outside of Massachusetts and thought, "the Diocese of Virginia would be a good place to work." I had been a finalist for an assistant's position in Richmond so I typed Virginia into the search engine. Now I thought I had typed it in the box for diocese, but in fact had typed it in the box for the state of Virginia so I got all the listings for the Commonwealth of Virginia. And there on the screen was this church called St. Aidan's in Virginia Beach who was looking for a rector. The prayer changed though, this time it was God if you want me there I will go. The rest is history. By the way, within months the new priest at the parish in Massachusetts was embroiled in a huge dispute with his new parish. Thank God, God did not give me what I asked for.

The big difference between listening to the spirit, attempting to discern where and what God is calling us to go and do and what the people of Israel wanted was that they had already made up their minds. What we need to do is to allow God to open our minds up to following his will, to do his work. This can come in expected and

unexpected ways. The key is to be open to the work of the Spirit, to allow God to be in charge.

As I prepare with the other deputies to attend our General Convention this summer in Salt Lake City I am particularly cognizant of how important it is to let God be in charge. I see in much of the correspondence already hardened and entrenched positions on important issues and I fear we may be approaching this meeting much like the Jews in their demands that God gives them what they want because they are right and the others are wrong.

A wise professor at seminary told us that when we went out to be curates and assistants it was important to realize that while we had a seat on the bus we call the church that we were not driving the bus. I have learned that as rector I still am not driving the bus. At least I shouldn't be driving the bus. There is a bumper sticker we've all seen that says God is my copilot. I really think that is the problem in much of the church, we view God as the copilot. The better bumper sticker is the one that says, "If God is your copilot, move over and let God drive." You see we really need to let God drive the bus.

So when you pray, especially a prayer of petition, make sure you are asking for information, for guidance, for love and not giving God a set of marching orders. And then don't forget that after you pray for that insight you just might want to take the time to listen for the answer.