

## 1 Samuel 5-6

Ian McEwan's book *Saturday*<sup>1</sup> is a fascinating book. All the action happens on Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> February 2003; the day of the anti-Iraq war protests, which was the largest global protest in history. The whole book is a quiet lament. McEwan uses as its centre-piece a nineteenth century poem by Matthew Arnold – Dover Beach. In Dover Beach, written in about 1851, Matthew Arnold mourns his and Britain's declining Christian faith. He likens it to the ebb of the tide on the shingle beach at night. The poem ends like this.

### ☞ *Sea of Faith*

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

You will have to read the book to see how McEwan uses this poem – but essentially he shares Arnold's sense of loss.

In many ways the early chapters of 1 Samuel provide a commentary on all this. The ebb and flow of faith is nothing new. That is what we have been watching in 1 Samuel so far. An insignificant family have a child Samuel, and he quietly grows in faith and stature. In 1 Samuel 3 we saw his servant-heartedness, his growing wisdom, and his courage all conspired to make him into a young man to be watched. He is an example of a great principle which applies in every age, and which Hannah gave voice to in 1 Samuel 2. God raises up the humble.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006).

But in 1 Samuel 2 she also said that God puts down the proud. And last week when we examined chapter 4 of 1 Samuel we saw God doing that. Those two young men, Hophni and Phineas, sons of Eli, the priest, are obsessed with money sex and power. Their pride, and their casual attitude to God infects the whole nation.

Last week we saw that they thought that just bringing the central symbol of their faith, the ark of God, into the midst of them would make them invincible in battle. They were tragically wrong, Hophni, Phineas and Eli died, the nation was defeated, and the ark of God was captured by the Philistines.

In many ways that is a commentary on what happened to the church in this country over the last 150 years. Today the Christian church has a much more marginal role in society as Matthew Arnold commented. Was that the inevitable progress of rationality over superstition? The bible causes us to hesitate in that simple assessment. God has often brought down his own people – not because of the power of the opposition, but because of their pride. But God is still sovereign.

In 1 Samuel 5:1-2 the Philistines proudly march home with the ark of God and set it up in their own temple of Dagon.



### **1 Sam 5:1-2**

It is a symbolic humiliation for the God of Israel. Just as today many commentators love to humiliate God's church. Richard Dawkins is on record as advocating mockery of Christians as a potent weapon. If he had been there Dawkins would have led the party who took the ark of God and laid it at Dagon's feet.

So what now? 1 Samuel 5-6 is going to show us that God is far from dead. Indeed he works as potently in the wider world as he does amongst God's people.

First of all amongst the Philistines we see signs of judgment

### *☞ Signs of judgment*



### **1 Samu 5:3**

To fall on your face was a sign of submission or worship. Dagon is bowing before the true God. In a pathetic little cameo the people prop him up – poor old Dagon.

But next night there is worse.



#### **1 Sam 5:4**

Was he grabbing hold of the threshold trying to get out of there? He didn't manage it. His head is off. His hands, symbols of his potency, are severed at the wrist. He is a dead spent force.

The conclusion of Philistine is as pathetic as Dagon.



#### **1 Sam 5:5**

“the threshold is a dangerous place” No you fools! The living God is a dangerous God.

That becomes clearer as time goes on.



#### **1 Sam 5:6**

These tumours and the later reference to rats suggests that this is probably an outbreak of bubonic plague, which causes swellings in lymph nodes, and is carried by rats. Although there is a natural explanation that doesn't affect the fact that this is a work of God. God brings judgment – albeit often by so called “natural” means.

And the Philistines start to get the message.



#### **1 Sam 5:7**

So the people of Ashdod move it to the next Philistine city of Gath. In Gath there is similar trouble so they kindly donate the ark to Ekron. By now the ark has something a reputation.



#### **1 Sam 5:10**

The connections between this story and our world today are massively important. And perhaps we can see that if we understand one very important truth in the bible. We read all this stuff about the temple of Dagon, as quaint but rather irrelevant stuff. Surely we don't worship idols any longer.

But wait a minute. The bible actually defines idolatry as setting up anything as the ultimate object of our affections, desires and hopes, other than the true God. Looking to anything other than God for our ultimate satisfaction and joy and security.

Tim Keller in his book *Counterfeit Gods* says this

"The human heart takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the centre of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfilment, if we attain them."

(discussing this – Tuesday?)

We don't worship Dagon – but we worship money and material things, sex and relationships, power and status. We have our idols.

And God is just as determined to show the world how impotent they are as he was to topple Dagon. We worship money – so the financial system nearly collapses. We worship sex and relationships – so sexually transmitted diseases rise and rise, so the family decays as people hunt for sexual and relational satisfaction, and each generation in our increasingly fractured society becomes less able to form relationships than the last. We worship status – whilst the stars we admire live humiliated and publicly degraded. We worship power – the western world has imperiously used its power to control weaker countries for generations now. Today the muslim countries, many of which have been horribly treated in the twentieth century – are sending us suicide bombers. The Lord's hand is heavy on us.

It may be that the rise of the so-called "new-atheism" led by richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and their ilk, is related to this. The Philistines experienced trouble associated with the God of Israel but drew the wrong conclusion. If they had said "we should worship this God" all would have been well. But actually they said "get this God out of here."

Some commentators suggest that the viciousness of the new atheists' attacks on Christianity may be in part due to a sense of fear. They just cannot, or will not see that the central problems of our society are not associated with Christianity, but with our worship of money, sex and power. Our idols.

Slowly, though, understanding dawns

☞ *Understanding dawns*

The Philistines start to see two things. Firstly that there is a right place for God.

☞ *There is a right place for God*



### 1 Sam 5:11a

In those days the “right place” for God was in the land of Israel. But the New Testament makes it plain that his “right place” is now nowhere geographical. His “right place” is to be worshipped as our supreme joy, from the depths of our hearts.

How I long for more and more people in our nation to see that this is the right place for God. Until that happens God’s hand will be heavy on them. Until that happens people’s idols will constantly let them down – what promised to give pleasure, happiness, security and joy will bring misery and insecurity. Again and again and again.

And also they see that a price has to be paid for their sin.

☞ *A price has to be paid for their sin*

They don’t act on their conviction for seven months – is that you? But finally they decide that they have got to do it.



### 1 Sam 6:2-3

They make five gold tumours and five gold rats. Five for the number of cities in the Philistine nation. Tumours because they were afflicted by tumours. The word could also mean a fortified city so there may be a double reference here – in part to the cities. And rats, apparently because they understood the connection between the rats and the disease.

Is this just sympathetic magic? It might be. But it is feeling its way towards something important. They are receiving a punishment and the offering which they are giving represents a payment of the same kind. The payment mirrors the penalty.

☞ *The payment mirrors the penalty*

Indeed they call it a “guilt offering” – a payment for sin offered to God.

Moreover the payment has to be very costly. The tumours and rats are gold.

☞ *The payment is precious*

They are feeling their way towards something that would not happen for another thousand years. Jesus’ death on the cross. He paid the exact penalty for all our sins.

His death was the most precious thing imaginable – the death of the Son of God. But this was not a guilt offering presented by us. It was a guilt offering to God the father offered by God the Son, because dear Philistines – we can't afford the payment for our sins. Only God can.

They decide to test their theory. They take two cows. Remove their calves. Hitch them to a cart with the ark on it, and step back to see what happens.

I have seen a sow who has lost her piglets break down a concrete wall. I have been on a trailer taking a newborn calf back to the farmyard, when the mother has jumped into the trailer and nearly trampled me to death. These cows will be desperate.

But they run away from their calves – straight to Beth Shemesh in Israel.



### **1 Sam 6:12**

It is not wrong to test this theory: the theory that there is a right place for God, that a precious payment needs to be made. The Christian assertion that God deserves to be worshipped above our idols, that Jesus died on the cross for our sins.

How might they test it? They won't do it with cows and carts – they will look at Christians. If you are a Christian here this morning you are the test case that people will observe. Sensible people won't be looking for perfection. But they will be looking for joy which breaks through any misery, contentment which overcomes disappointment, purpose and hope which defeats despair. They will be looking for a healthy life – even in the midst of imperfections. Our church vision is to “delight in God, displaying his glory.” If God is in his right place we will display his glory. Is that you?

And if you are not a Christian yet, then it is quite legitimate to test whether the Christian claims are true. The Philistines followed the cart and watched.

☞ *Show newscast interview.*

“someone has said that all desire is the desire to be at one with God in substitute form. So perhaps we can draw attention, not to the shadow on the wall but to the source of light itself.”