

We're going to look at Government and how we see it portrayed in the Bible because I suppose part of the reason why I wanted to look at this issue was to do with what we've seen in our newspapers and on our television screens over the last few months. So we're thinking about democracy and in particular there's some people there, and the question I've got up there is: Is democracy under threat? And we've got there Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (he is the president of Turkey), we've got Carrie Lam (she's the CEO of Hong Kong), we've got a man called Trump (I think some of us may have heard of, made a bit of a splash over the last few years), we've got Vladimir Putin (of Russia), we've got Narendra Modi (the Prime Minister of India), and we have got Jair Bolsonaro (who models himself on Donald Trump wonderfully and he is in Brazil and you'll have seen the awful pictures of the wildfires not only no win the Amazon rainforest but also in area of wetland, the largest wetland in the world, called the Pantanal). And so the reason I've got those pictures up is that all six of those leaders, and to be honest I could have kept going but I thought that's probably enough for one morning, but they're all leaders where you would have to question, they would all say they are Democrats in the way that they function and yet there have been major issues with the way that they function as democratic leaders in the world. Is democracy under threat?

It's interesting when we look at the bible - we're going to read the bible a little bit later but I just want to do a little bit of an overview of what we see of governance in the Old Testament because actually most of us would agree with the quote that we heard from Winston Churchill a bit earlier which said that democracy is the worst form of government except for every other form of government that's been tried. Most of us would agree that democracy is far from perfect but it's the least worst option in our world for how countries should be governed. The Old Testament actually describes several forms of government in ancient Israel, and I just want to quickly look at a few of those.

The Israelites started out as a Patriarchy - a Patriarchy is a system in which every family, every clan, every tribe was ruled by the oldest male; that would either be the father within the family, and if the father passed away then that would pass to the oldest son. And that was the way that governance first started. But if we look at that picture there (it's a picture of Jacob stealing Esau's birthright from his father Isaac; so you'll remember he wore animal hair over his arms, and as his dad felt his arms he thought "Ah, that's my hairy son, Esau" - no it wasn't, it was your cunning son Jacob pretending to be Esau - so the birthright was given to the youngest son rather than the older one. So Patriarchy could be manipulated.

The next form of governance in the Old Testament amongst the Israelites that I wanted to refer to was Theocracy which means "Direct rule by God", but that direct rule was mediated through the priesthood. So the priests would interpret what God wanted to do. But, to be honest, that's also a fallible system - and I say that not as a priest but as a minister: I don't think you want to put me in charge, you don't know what I'll get up to. And the problem with power is that as soon as you have power you get quite used to it and you think "I'm really good at this, and I love all the perks"; so I would suggest to you; don't put your minister in charge of the country, it's not a good idea because it was a fallible system. In 1 Samuel chapter 2 a judgement is given against the sons of the high priest Eli, and they were two men called Hophni and Phinehas, and basically they were the sons of the high priest but they got used to having all of the privileges, and all of the perks, of

being part of the family that was making decisions about how things happened in Israel. And they got used to having all that power and privilege, and they enjoyed it so much God brought judgement upon them and said, "Your family is going to die out" (he said this to Eli) "because you've mistreated your responsibilities as high priest." So Theocracy's not a great idea either.

Let's have a look at another one. We then had Rule by Law (via the Judges). Now there's a book in the Old Testament called Judges, and that was these people, mostly men, but actually there were a few women as well who were also judges: a woman called Deborah, for instance, was one of the Judges. And the idea was they interpreted the law as it was written down, and they delivered that law to the people and said this is how you should live. But the danger with that is many of those judges didn't know the law very well (the Law in the Old Testament, in the Pentateuch - the first five books of the bible), and they certainly didn't teach it very well.

So those were the ways in which the Israelites were governed in those early years when they were trying to work out what sort of nation they were. In the end the people demanded a king: the people said "We want to be like the other nations!" What a failure that must have been that they had been a people that were set apart, that God had a special relationship with, but the people said: "No! We want to be like everybody else; we don't want to be the way that we've been." And it's undoubtedly had mistakes, but they wanted to be like other people. And you know, when they demanded a king God said to them "If you want a king you can have a king, but I tell you this:..." (this is a bit of a loose translation) "...if you want a king your king will lord it over you, he will demand of you that you will send your sons into battle, that you send your children to build his palaces, and he will dominate your lives. But if you want a king I'll let you have a king." And that, of course, is what happened.

The first king was appointed, of course that first king was Saul, and his son was David, known as the greatest of Israel's kings, and he was followed by his son Solomon. Now even David, the greatest king, made mistakes. Some of you will know the story of when he was looking out of his window and saw a beautiful woman bathing, and he lusted after her, and he committed a terrible act by having that woman's husband killed in battle so that he could take that man's wife. David, even the greatest king, made some dreadful mistakes during his reign. And some of those choices caused the people of Israel to embark on a democratic experiment which we're going to look at now. If you have your bibles you might like to look up 1 Kings chapter 12, and we're going to begin at the start of the chapter. Solomon (the third of the first three kings Saul, David and Solomon) has just died and his son is called Rehoboam (there's some great names of these old kings).

[Reading 1 Kings 12:1-13, 16-19]

Now that needs a little bit of interpretation otherwise you'll have no idea what's going on, so I just want to sort of explain a little bit about what was going on there. The people had loved king Solomon because of the peace he had brought, because of the wealth he had brought, because Solomon was a really good diplomat. So instead of fighting with the nations around him Solomon made trade treaties. We're aware of trade treaties at the moment because we in Britain are seeking to write new trade treaties with different countries around the world. This is what Solomon was very good at: he made treaties with countries instead of fighting with them. And he brought immense wealth, and he brought peace, to the nation of Israel. But they also basked in the glory of his fame because Solomon was famous as a man of great wisdom. And he built beautiful things; he built a magnificent new temple to worship God in, and he built wonderful palaces for himself. But the downside of all of this was that thousands of people, thousands of Israelites, had to be conscripted (and were basically like slaves) building all of these massive

temples and palaces.

And so this is why the people - went to Rehoboam, Solomon's son, and said "Look, Solomon had us building all these magnificent buildings - we don't want to live like that any more! Promise you won't expect as much of us as Solomon did and then we will serve you as king." The people wanted reassurances from Rehoboam that he wasn't going to require such a massive commitment from them during his reign. Now Rehoboam received good advice from the elders who had served his father; and they said "Be kind to the people; tell them you won't expect as much from them. They will serve you." But Rehoboam got arrogant, foolish advice from his friends whom he had promoted recently into his court; and they told him to threaten the people that if they didn't serve him as slaves to build whatever he wanted them to do then he would beat them even harder than Solomon had done. He went with that arrogant, foolish advice.

So for the twelve tribes of Israel that's what it meant when we had those verses where it said "every house should do as it feels is right." In other words every tribe: make your own decision; you've heard what Rehoboam's going to do, make your own decision. So this is the sort of democracy they had: it wasn't "one man one vote" (or one person one vote), it was basically each house, each tribe of Israel saying "Ok we've heard what Rehoboam's said, do we want him as our king or not?" And we find out here that they made decisions to either become subjects of this arrogant bullying king, or to choose someone else to become their king.

Now a man named Jeroboam had worked in Solomon's building projects so he knew how hard it was to work on these massive building projects. He'd become a popular figure but had had to flee from Solomon because he was getting too popular - so he was in Egypt. And the ten northern tribes decided to elect this man Jeroboam as their king. And so we have the division here of Israel into the ten northern tribes who elected their king Jeroboam, and the two southern tribes that together were known as Judah and they were around Jerusalem and they chose to remain faithful to Solomon's son. So they split into two separate nations: Israel in the north, Judah in the south.

Now this could have caused a civil war if they hadn't broken into two like that - it could have caused civil war in Israel. Or it could have caused them to persecute the minority group; but they didn't do that either - instead they separated into these two nations. However, it's interesting: in the northern kingdom where they'd elected Jeroboam very soon after that they found that Jeroboam passed an interesting law, and it was a law to put himself above the law. "I hereby tell you that I am your king and anything I say goes!" And they thought to themselves, "we didn't elect you to make a law like that." And he put himself above the law. And the people were still looking to Jerusalem for the temple, for worship; so Jeroboam said "I'm setting up two worship centres in the northern kingdom, in the northern tribes, and I'm going to build you a couple of nice golden calves to worship." Now we know that's not a good thing: we know it from another story that golden calves never go well: it's idolatry and God completely says that's totally not what his people should do - he was their God, they did not need idols to worship. So he was making bad decisions: he put himself above the law and made those decisions.

He also decided to pass another law forbidding the people from voting him out, even though he'd been very happy to be voted in! Doesn't that remind you of one or two people in our world, you know who are very happy to get voted in to free the people, and when they get into position they don't want to allow the democratic process to remove them again? And he decreed that his son would inherit the throne after his own death.

Even though he was king and wanted to be king forever, the reality is that Jeroboam discovered

that he was human and during his reign Jeroboam had various wars with the southern kingdom, with Judah, and one of those went very badly and his army was heavily defeated. And he never recovered from the shock of that defeat and he died soon afterwards.

So that's a very brief outline of the democratic experiment that the Israelite people tried, the Jewish people tried, during that turbulent time, and we find actually that his son Nadab did succeed Jeroboam as king, but he was even worse than his father and he only lasted two years before he was stabbed in the back (quite literally by this picture) by another rival who wanted the throne, and that person then killed all of Nadab's family. Now I included this picture here (Nadab getting stabbed in the back by various people) because it reminds me of one of my favourite lines from a Carry On film; in Carry On Cleo, Kenneth Williams when he's attacked by various people (they all stab him in the back and he's playing Caesar) and he says "Infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me!" And I love that line, and I just wanted to include it as it fits in very well there.

But for a moment or two I want to reflect on Jesus' view of good government, because actually Jesus wasn't a freedom fighter wanting to overthrow the Romans, but when he thought it was right Jesus was prepared to break the law: when he overthrew the tables in the temple that was breaking the law because treating the temple with respect and having respect for the priests - that would all have been part of the law of the land. And yet Jesus was prepared in certain circumstances to break the law. Jesus, of course, was asked lots of questions by the Jewish leaders to catch him out, and one of the questions they asked him was "Should we pay taxes to Caesar, or should we not?" And the people were trying to catch him out there. But Jesus of course famously took a coin and said to the people "Whose face is on this coin?" And they said "The face of Caesar." And Jesus said these famous words: "Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's!" And I think what Jesus is saying there (and I just want to finish with this) is pay your taxes, obey the law of the land, fulfil your reasonable civic duties, but remember that you live according to a higher law and if that law comes into conflict with the law of your land then you have to think about who do I really serve? And he's saying there that you owe ultimate allegiance to God; whether you live under a democracy or any other form of government Jesus is saying our highest allegiance is to God.

And I'll leave you with that word.