

THE DIVIDED KINGDOM –RELATIONSHIP AND COMMUNITY BREAKERS

When I was at work in the 1980s I had a quite argumentative colleague. We called him JR, those were his initials, like JR the killer in Dallas for those who remember. He irritated me. We had a few head to head arguments and in the end I just tried to avoid him. We didn't really get reconciled for some time.

Later, again before I was a Christian I had another colleague, let's call him Carlos. He was always bullying fellow workers and talking down to them. One day I did decide to confront him, saying "you can't talk to people like that". His answer was to push me against a wall and square up with his fists "you wanna fight, I'm pretty good". "I don't think that will be necessary..." I said at which point he backed off. But we were enemies after that for a long time.

I see now that the fault wasn't all on their side; they were ambitious but so was I. They were on my patch and so was I. I didn't pray – I wasn't a Christian - I didn't forgive, didn't seek to make peace by having open, friendly discussion – I sought to avoid discussion in one case while in the other perhaps going in too heavily.

Still, I bet you have had similar experiences. Maybe you found yourself falling out with people you work with, or you have seen colleagues that fell out, which has soured the community in a staff-room or in the mums and toddlers group, neighbours. Or you may have fallen out with a friend, or you can't understand why they seem to want to avoid you. You may even have gone through the trauma of a divorce, and remain at daggers drawn with your former partner.

Relationships matter. They give meaning to our lives. One of the first things God says in the Bible is "it is not good for man to be alone". The Bible itself celebrates friendship. Think of David and Jonathan "Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself". Ecclesiastes talks of how much we need people in difficult times "If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!"

Our God is a God of relationships. He lives in a beautiful eternal love relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Recall from earlier talks how he loved to walk with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, his friendships with Abraham, Moses and David. If we have faith in Jesus, we are adopted as God's children "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" says John 1:12.

And God loves community among those who love him, as he nurtures and loves his church. Jesus said in John 17:23 "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." A whole person is in community with God (vertical) and with fellow men (horizontal).

Besides the hurt they cause to us, there is nothing sadder to God than a broken relationship, or a broken community. This was to be the fate of Israel after the death of Solomon.

Last week Wayne talked to us about Solomon and the way despite his wisdom he came to grief. He chose to go beyond what God wanted him to do, in order to control events, especially in worshipping foreign gods, always doing a "little bit more" than he was allowed. As Wayne said, he sought to meet legitimate needs in an illegitimate way.

God was merciful to Solomon in keeping his kingdom intact, but his son Rehoboam was to reap the whirlwind. Basically, Rehoboam acted so badly that most of the kingdom (the northern tribes led by Ephraim) seceded to form what we now call Israel. [map on the screen.] The rump left to Rehoboam were the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. And not only did the kingdom divide, it never came together again.

This is a sad tale but everything is in the Bible for a purpose: as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us”. We shall see in the division of the kingdom and its staying divided some key pitfalls in relationships that can end community.

A little background. Until Saul became the first king, the tribes of Israel had been a loose federation. King Saul was from the northern tribes, but when David from southerly Judah took over, the northern tribes were willing to accept him as king. They also put up with Solomon but with increasing dissatisfaction over the taxes and forced labour he imposed on the country.

The event of the division of the kingdom is told in 1 Kings 12. It’s a dramatic scene. All the tribes were encamped together for the grand meeting to accept Rehoboam, Solomon’s son as king. He was away from home territory, in the north of the kingdom. A deputation came from the people to ask for an easing of Solomon’s burden of taxes and forced labour. How did he react?

Well, he asked for three days to consult – a good start. But then it went downhill. His elderly counsellors gave wise advice "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favourable answer, they will always be your servants." These were clearly decent mentors [and here we can recall Wayne’s advice to seek one].

But he disregarded their wisdom. Instead he listened to unwise counsellors he had grown up with, other spoilt young men, advising him to be all take and no give: a tyrant and not a servant. So this is what he said “My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.” Rehoboam failed to walk with the wise.

He compounded his errors with an unwise choice of mediator to try to settle things afterwards. It says that “King Rehoboam sent out Adoniram, who was in charge of forced labour, but all Israel stoned him to death.” Rehoboam had to drive off for his life in his chariot!

All through this he did not pray or rely on God. He lived in a prayer free zone.

I feel quite sorry for Solomon, as in Ecclesiastes he reflected that all his hard work could come to nothing after his death “I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?” Well, his son Rehoboam was a fool and he squandered his inheritance.

All this led to the north seceding from Judah and setting up their own kingdom under Jeroboam. Mnemonic – Rehoboam refused to compromise Jeroboam split from Judah. The tragedy deepened, as the division of the kingdom was never healed. Why did it remain divided? First we should highlight that it is always easier to break what belongs together than to restore what is broken. But equally, behaviour of those involved can worsen a split once it occurs. We are not talking about an isolated incident but a pattern of divisive behaviour.

Jeroboam was the successful leader of the northern tribes. He had a lot going for him. God had promised him an everlasting kingdom, like David, if he would be obedient. But he failed to trust God, or even pray before important decisions. He lived in a prayer free zone too. The Bible records he thought to himself "The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem...they will kill me and return to King Rehoboam." So he sought to manipulate and control God and the people "The king made two golden calves. He said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." What he was doing was making a God who did not require obedience, a puppet God and it prompted further idol worship. It cemented the breaking of the kingdom because of separate centres of worship, which ultimately became virtually separate faiths.

Later kings also contributed, for example by being half hearted about God. The verdict on Abijah of Judah is "He committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been." This is how most of the succeeding kings of both Israel and Judah are judged. As Wayne highlighted last week, 95% commitment is 5% too little. 2 Chronicles 16:9 encourages us in this "the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him".

Broken communities malfunction. The whole book of Kings from this point on is a litany of generally bad kings, especially in the northern kingdom, leading ultimately to exile in Assyria from which the Israelites never returned. And in the meantime, life was punctuated by murder, idolatry and war.

Let's summarise the pitfalls leading to a breaking of the kingdom we have highlighted:

- Prayer free zone – not listening to God
- Ignoring wise advice
- Not being a servant but a tyrant
- Unwise choice of peacemaker
- Not trusting God's promises
- Setting up idols in place of God
- Manipulation of people
- Being half hearted about God

A simple summary could say that they involve disobeying God and disregarding human wisdom and love. A focus on the self and selfish motives.

This, you may say, is high politics, the actions of kings and a long time ago. What has it to do with us today? A great deal. "kingdom breakers" are also "community breakers" and can impinge on to friendships, workplaces, communities, churches, families, marriages – not just countries. Think for example of all the reasons why neighbours fall out like Noise, Anti-Social Behaviour, Harassment, Animal Disturbance, Boundary Problems, Car Parking Issues. So often petty, but how much misery they cause, and how often they fester unresolved for decades? And yet their root is often the same as the divided kingdom; a focus on the self and selfish motives by at least one party.

Consider instead a reversal of the relationship and community breakers we have identified; how they could become community healers: What Paul would call "a more excellent way". Rehoboam and the neighbours from hell could have usefully listened! Here they are:

Pray at all times
Listen to advice from a wise person – have a mentor!
Be servants to one another
Be a peacemaker
Trust God
Worship God alone
Let people run their own lives – don't seek control
Be full on for God

The New Testament highlights how to avoid pitfalls to relationships and community. Remember Jesus stressed peace making: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." Are we? Serving our neighbour as in the Good Samaritan. And Paul reminds us about prayer "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests." We mustn't live in a prayer free zone – God answers knee mail. And Jesus taught us about mending relationships - he said you must forgive: "then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times". Mark Twain said "forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that crushed it". Do we forgive? He

We've seen that all of these were lacking in ancient Israel. What about our communities? Our workplace. Our relatives? Our neighbourhoods? Our village community? Even our church? Consider what we are lacking.....that leaves our communities divided and relationships broken.....

Think of South Africa as a positive example of the work of community healers. The black majority suffered for many years under apartheid, which made them second-class citizens. Many of their people had been imprisoned and murdered by the state, while an armed resistance had led to the death of whites too. It could all too easily have been a bloodbath after the transition to majority rule. But through massive prayer and the peacemaking of the likes of Nelson Mandela the outcome was reconciliation and forgiveness. People were even willing to forgive the killers of their relatives, if they would acknowledge the murder and say sorry.

Look too at the way the Amish have forgiven the murderer of their children, they are even looking after the widow of the killer. I quote mid wife Rhita Rhoads who was present for the birth of two of the five murdered girls: "If you have Jesus in your heart and He has forgiven you, how can you not forgive other people?"

I believe that neither of these miracles of reconciliation could have happened without a deep relation with God on the part of the healer, who caters for our deepest needs - security, significance and self worth.

What great communities and relationships we could be in if we could **overcome the breakers and be the healers**...aren't you inspired to try, in your workplace, among your relatives, neighbours, friends, when you witness conflict? And on the other hand, do you have things that you could make amends for? Do you have a broken relationship or community where God has challenged you to act to make amends, to be reconciled, to forgive?

Prayer for those struggling to find forgiveness and reconciliation in broken relationships and communities - to overcome the pitfalls.

Prayer for those seeking to be peacemakers in relationships and communities – to be the healers.

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Philip reminded us that God loves to be in relationship with us, and to see us in fruitful relationships with one another. But all too often relationships are broken. The Division of the Kingdom after the death of Solomon helps us to understand why relationships and communities are often broken. The individuals concerned took a selfish approach, disobeying God and disregarding human wisdom and love. We can see in this some pitfalls (“breakers”) that could also hinder our own relationships and communities. These include on the one hand living in a prayer free zone – not listening to God; not trusting God’s promises; setting up idols in place of God; and being half hearted about God. On the other hand, the kings ignored wise human advice, sought to not be servants but tyrants, made unwise choices of peacemaker and manipulated people for their own selfish ends.

Philip contended that the Bible teaches a “more excellent way” to avoid these “breakers” – to instead be community healers, which is to invert these errors. Hence we should pray at all times, trust God, worship him alone and be full on for God, while also listening to advice from a wise person – have a mentor!, be servants to one another, be a peacemaker and let people run their own lives – don’t seek control. And forgive – most crucial of all. He argued that these underlay miraculous reconciliations as in South Africa and for the Amish after the slaughter of their children. We too are challenged to avoid the community breakers and be relationship healers.

SOME ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- Can you remember falling out with someone? Over what? Was the division sorted out – how?
- Have you ever seen others falling out and tried to help them sort things out?
- Do you recognise the “breakers” acting in your relationships and communities? Can you give examples?
- How can being a Christian help us be peacemakers in our daily lives?