17 November 2019: Choral Matins
The Twenty-Second Sunday after Trinity
1 Samuel 16:1–13, Matthew 13:44–52
The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity
‘The Anointed One’

While the country is being stirred up by the elections and politicians form holy and unholy alliances (about which I will say no more), I have been caught up in two significant appointments. The first is for a Managing Director of the new Schwarzman Humanities Centre that will be the University’s major hub for arts, cultures, languages and literatures with an auditorium, venues for music, drama, dance, film and exhibitions. The second is for a Head of Administration for my own Faculty of Theology and Religion. I have been sifting through piles of applications making, with others, judgements on cvs as they meet or do not meet the criteria in the job descriptions. This is the first stage in creating a ‘long list’ of those eligible that then gets whittled down into a short list where candidates for the posts are invited for a very probing interview. Last week we interviewed for one of the positions and tomorrow morning we interview for another. There’s a lot of reading, discussing, evaluating and debate involved and all the time it is not simply a matter of what an applicant says about themselves, but what evidence supports the claims that they are making.

So it is not a surprise then to find my attention in our two readings this morning was drawn to the passage from 1 Samuel about the selecting and anointing of David. As a HR selection process what is described would not pass any QA standard for employment today - other than the complete lack of bias on behalf of Samuel himself. David’s selection obviously came as a complete and unprepared for surprise to him too. But it is totally in line with how God repeatedly operates. It demonstrates with utmost clarity a divine principle: “the Lord sees not as a human being sees; for human beings look upon outward appearance, but the Lord looks deep into the heart.” And the Lord’s judgements on these matter are, without question, right; they will be proven to be right – as every Tree of Jesse window in every church, cathedral and monastic priory makes manifest. For whatever human weaknesses become all too apparent later in the life of David, the
anointing remains – right down to Jesus, son of Mary, also born in the backwaters of that sleepy village of Bethlehem. Now one of the most contested zones in Palestine. How much greater than the judgement upon Saul, the old king, from whom the anointing was taken away: “I have rejected him from reigning over Israel”, the Lord says.

Jesus Christ repeats for the Pharisee and Temple officials the principle of the divine operation in appointments: “the stone the builders rejected becomes the chief cornerstone” of what God will establish: the kingdom – the outcome of and the basis for the gospel of universal salvation, flourishing, healing, forgiveness, reconciliation. It is not just that David is the youngest of the sons and so left to tend the flocks while the real and elaborate liturgical business of sacrifice takes place in Jesse’s barn. It is not just that David was marginalized as insignificant by his own family. David comes in from the fields unsanctified. He is summoned to the feast not just as the uninvited one. He comes to the feast as one ritually unclean, unpurified, unprepared for the honours that will follow. Dubious honours to be sure by all human appearances – to be the anointed one while Saul still holds power and political legitimation in the country. But vast and providential honours all the same, in the eyes of God. The destiny of the nations will turn upon this insignificant boy walking in unwashed from the fields. A job needs to be done and David is the one who will do it. This would run risks no appointment panel I know of today would ever take.

In part, the risks arise because there is no job description: no one, including Samuel, knows what the job of being king and reigning over Israel means. They know, from Saul, what it might look like, and no doubt the top criteria were striking fear in the hearts of Israelite enemies and a warrior’s ability to command and keep such enemies at bay. But Samuel is told when Jesse’s first born, Eliab, comes before him: “Don’t look upon his countenance or the height of his stature.” So maybe the job is not the job human beings believe it should be. Maybe the real tasks to be undertaken are not military and political; maybe they are pastoral and the skill set needed is honed in simply tending to sheep – in caring, in protecting, in nurturing. But the site of most importance to God seems to be not even the skill-set, but rather the heart; a skill set rooted and formed in the heart. The Lord “looks deep into the heart” and the disposition that resides there. Is the heart true? Is the heart faithful? Is the heart of this human being alike, in some remote and very human way, the heart of God? Does it long – for longing is the animating power of the heart – does it long for what God longs for? By all human appearances the best that can be said about this boy from the sheepfolds is that he is untested. And there is a deep and
thickly forested ravine between having potential and fulfilling that potential. But God, who traverses time and the ravines between potential and its future development, enfolks all beginnings and ends. So God’s judgement stands. It is true. And it says much for the faithfulness of Samuel that he simply obeyed, taking the horn and anointing David in front of his father and elder brothers. Who probably thought he was mad. And it says even more about the faithfulness of Samuel that he left things at that. Having done what he came to do, “Samuel rose up and went to Ramah.” And David, the anointed one, is left, the Spirit of God now upon him, to go about his business as usual – tending those sheep. For the outworking of that anointing, its fulfilment lies neither in his hands nor Samuel’s: God will do what God has desired to do, because the principle operating throughout will finds its fulfilment: the true of heart will fulfil that which the true of heart should fulfil, walking in all those good words that God has preordained that he or she should work in. To cite one of Cranmer’s astonishingly wise collects. Faithfulness will always find its consummate expression; and unfaithfulness likewise.

Meanwhile posts are advertised, people apply, people are selected for interview, interviewed and appointments made. And one hopes, on the selection panels, that the best people get the job – because we know what the job is and just have to fit one with the other. We do the very best we can with our secular management tools, and all I have said this morning is not to belittle them or their importance. What the passage from 1 Samuel underlines for us – and in doing so underscores a rule of divine operation that will bring us to Christmas - is that “My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are my ways your ways,” says the Lord.