Samuel Once More: Realpolitik or Sermon on the Mount?

It is a month later, and the book of Samuel is still on my mind. Its marvellous storytelling, as simple as it is profound, continues to impact me. One way to look at the book, as mentioned last month, is as studies in the use of power. We could also look at it as a series of case studies in politics and war.

Which leads to a controversial question: how do we as Christians view and engage in politics or war? I don't have anything close to a full answer, and Samuel does not give one. Instead, it forces us to think by confronting us with actual events, often without comment.

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Politics and War: Some Past and Present Answers

Let’s first look at a few common solutions to the dilemma.

1. Christendom. In the Western tradition, for a long time, the church sought to hold sway over politics and weld church and state into a union. We call this Christendom and usually trace it to Constantine, the emperor who legalised Christianity and made it a privileged religion in the Roman empire.

In the long run, becoming the ‘state church’ did not serve the church well. It is, after all, the *state* church, not the church *state*, implying the state ended up controlling and using the church, not the other way around. Not good. Already for this reason, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow is making a BIG mistake fusing his church and theology with Russian nationalism and Putin’s agenda.

2. *Realpolitik*. Germans invented this word, so, yes, it is German, but it is not hard to guess its meaning. Accepting the situation as it is, *Realpolitik* pragmatically seeks what is possible within the given constraints, rather than taking its lead from ideals or conceptions of right and wrong.

3. Compassionate idealism and ethics. Many Christians, especially those of a more liberal bend, feel that *Realpolitik* is too little. They want to apply the teachings of Jesus to international politics. One could say, oversimplifying things, that they take their orientation from the Sermon on the Mount.

Some of them, for instance, now demand a stop to Western weapons deliveries to Ukraine and instead call for negotiations. Their number is surprisingly small. Or perhaps not surprisingly; it is far from clear what there is to negotiate.

4. ‘Pietist’ withdrawal. I put ‘pietist’ in quotation marks because this is not at all the original pietist position. However, in later church history, pietists and other, like-minded evangelicals have often taken this course and still do today. They withdraw from politics and war as something defiling, something in which a real believer will not take part.

It enables them to keep their hands clean. But is that right? I doubt it, and I feel Samuel is on my side.

The Balance: Compassionate Idealism and Realpolitik

Samuel, in my view, seeks to balance compassionate idealism, ethics, and *Realpolitik*. It does this implicitly. One way it does this is by having different persons act out one or the other.

Naturally, David often stands for what is right or for compassion. Or he will do what is wrong and acknowledge it afterwards. But compassion and idealism are not always in the right. Sometimes, Joab’s *Realpolitik* is right.

Joab can be ruthless (and immoral) in defending his interests, as both Abner and Amasa found out to their detriment. But Joab is not always wrong. When David insists on a census, Joab has serious misgivings and offers resistance, even if to no avail (2 Sam. 24).

And then there is the Absalom crisis (2 Sam. 15-20). David's response is a curious mix of integrity, shrewdness, piety, and seemingly passive submission.

- He offers to release Ittai, a foreigner and recent conscript, of his commitment (2 Sam. 15:19f).
- He tells Zadok and Abiathar to take the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 15:25f, in contrast to 1 Sam. 4:4).
- Then he instructs them to keep him informed – making them his intelligence agents (2 Sam. 15:27f).
- When he hears that Ahithophel has joined Absalom, he prays to God to thwart Ahithophel's counsel (2 Sam. 15:31).
- Immediately after, he shrewdly tells Hushai to go back to Jerusalem and thwart Ahithophel's counsel, connecting him with the informers, Zadok and Abiathar (2 Sam. 15:32-37). Notice the subtle but (for Absalom) ominous note at the end: "So Hushai, David's friend, came into the city, just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem" (2 Sam. 15:37). It will be Absalom's downfall that he rejects the counsel of Ahithophel to immediately pursue David and kill the king, instead heeding Hushai's advice (2 Sam. 17:1-14). On this, the storyteller offers one of his rare comments, to make sure we don't miss it: "For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring harm upon Absalom" (2 Sam. 17:14). At this, Ahithophel recognizes that Absalom is doomed and goes home and hangs himself (2 Sam. 17:23).
- David allows Shimei to curse him (2 Sam. 16:5-13).
- And he organizes the army for battle with Absalom (2 Sam. 18:1-4).
- After Absalom's defeat, David retakes the initiative by reaching out to the elders of Judah (2 Sam. 19:11-14).

But when it comes to his son, David is compassionate, perhaps to a fault. "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom", he orders (2 Sam. 18:5). Joab ignores the command and has Absalom killed (2 Sam. 18:14f).

At this point, the narrative slows down considerably, as it tells us in detail about the two messengers bringing the news of victory to the king (2 Sam. 18:19-32) and recounts the resulting grief (2 Sam. 18:33-19:3). It now needs the clear rebuke and the *Realpolitik* of Joab to save the day:

> Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, “You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life and the lives of your sons and your daughters and the lives of your wives and your concubines, because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you, for today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the LORD, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now.” (2 Sam. 19:5-7)

Here is my take on this. David’s compassion and love for Absalom was not wrong. Is not this the heart of a father, corresponding with the heart of God? But it was out of balance.

David must have recognized that Joab was in the right because this is what he did:

> Then the king arose and took his seat in the gate. And the people were all told, “Behold, the king is sitting in the gate.” And all the people came before the king. (2 Sam. 19:8)

Compassionate idealism is right and good, but in this fallen world, it must be balanced by a measure of *Realpolitik*. Wars (and the death of a son), as undesirable as they are, cannot always be avoided. Not in David’s time, and not today. Not yet.

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