

Who's in charge?

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* 1 Samuel 8:4-20

God's people want a king. The land is in chaos, as tribes join together under a charismatic leader, and then separate again. The people look at the stability of the nations around them, and want it for themselves. So they go to the prophet Samuel and ask him for a king.

There are things they have not noticed, however. They have not noticed how kings set limits on people's lives, or how they demand taxes from their subjects, or how they take the young men to fight their wars. And there is another, much more important, problem with their request. They have forgotten that they already have a king. He is the Lord their God, who rescued them from slavery, gave

them a land, and appointed judges and prophets to guide them. "They have rejected me from being king over them," God says to Samuel. On God's behalf Samuel points all this out to the people. But the people are adamant, and they get their king.

All this may seem very distant from us. However, this story reflects an ongoing dilemma for communities of people of faith. Do we choose settled structures, with hierarchies of carefully chosen leaders, with buildings and rules, or do we go the way of the Israelites in the wilderness, following a charismatic leader, listening for the voice of God? Both have their merits, and both their dangers. We shall see in the coming weeks how well Israel's choice turns out. ☺

Guide us, Lord, when we make choices about how we live and worship together. Help us to build communities of faith, in which we can love and respect one another, always acknowledging you as our king and our God. Amen.

Fruits of the Spirit

– a meditation on Galatians 5:22-23

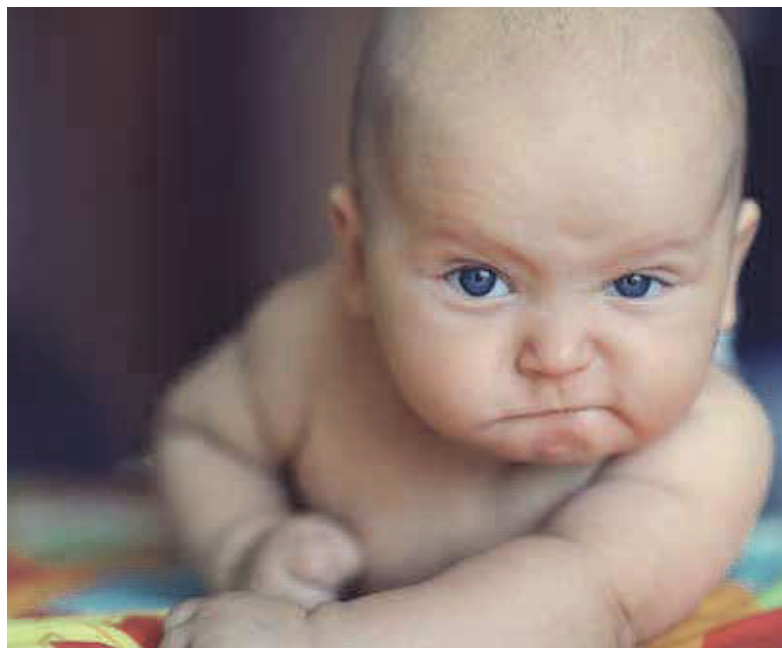
The goodness of the fig

by Caroline Hodgson

In Deuteronomy 8:8 the Land of Plenty is mouthwateringly described as: "a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey". In 1 Kings 4:25 we are told that "Judah and Israel lived in safety... all of them under their vines and fig trees", to denote peace and prosperity. By contrast, in Matthew 21:18-22 we read about

an unproductive fig tree which withers under Jesus' reproach.

If we don't receive spiritual nourishment our souls, like the unfruitful fig tree, will be unproductive. A good start is to plant ourselves firmly in our church community. As the writer Frank Cottrell Boyce says: "Every parish has the potential to be a neighbourhood utopia." Being part of any community can be fraught with difficulties, but if we grow in a spirit of prayerful cooperation, we make the ground a bit richer, a more fertile place for the word of God to flourish and produce fruit. ☺



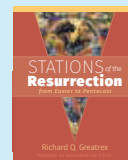
The history of the Eucharist

Part I, biblical times

by Richard Greatrex

When Jesus celebrated the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) tell us it was the annual Passover meal. John's Gospel has a different symbolic focus, suggesting that Jesus' death occurs on the day the Passover lambs were sacrificed, placing this communal meal a day earlier. Either way, Passover provides a key context for the Eucharist. While both are meals

centred upon a redemptive experience, when God saves a community, they are much more than mere remembrance. Transcending re-enactment of an historical moment they, in some indefinable, mystical way, become the event itself. Time and space are broken open: we are in the Hebrew people's Egyptian homes, dressed ready for exodus, Jesus blesses and shares his last meal with us. God's saving action is ongoing, effective in the past, present and future. ☺



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“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

Psalms 23:6