

Donnybrook

13 January 2022

Welcome

Part of becoming wise is to learn from experience. And in learning from experience, we may notice patterns which help us understand the past, so as to live better in the present. This can happen also at the level of church, as we set out this year on our new synodal pathways.

Topic

Such learning from the past has left its mark in our first reading today, which at first sight may seem so remote and bizarre.

Steps

It may help to remember that which the story of Samuel takes place in about the 11th century BC, the version we have comes from much, much later – about 4 or 5 hundred years later. By then, a particular way of interpreting the past had evolved. History is always interpretation, of course.

In the later period, the writers looked back and saw a pattern: infidelity, punishment, conversion, renewal. They didn't see this simply in individual stories but over a long evolution. This way of telling the history of Israel affects the major historical books: Joshua and Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, taking from from the time before King David to the great exile in Babylon, a vast narrative arc, covering several centuries.

Simply put, they tried to learn from the past. Whenever they ancient Israelites broke their covenant with the Lord, things did not go well with them. In our reading today, we find a double defeat. After the first defeat, they bring their most sacred shrine, the ark of the covenant, but it does them no good. It emerges later that they have mixed their worship of the Lord with other fertility deities and so disaster followed. Before they get the ark back, Samuel calls them to convert and set aside these false gods and goddesses. They had been copiously unfaithful.

Conclusion

Writing hundreds of years later, the ancient Israelites tried to learn from the big patterns of the past. We might use the four-fold pattern to look at our experience as a church: infidelity, punishment, conversion, renewal. We find ourselves in the time between punishment and conversion, perhaps not a bad place to be as we set out on our synodal pathway.