

THE BIG PICTURE
THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES

Go MAD – let me introduce you to SU's conference for young people; for S5 and S6 pupils, young people aged 16-18 and it is designed to help them live out their faith at school, in the community, in the Church. It is a great title, not because it is about being mad and behaving wildly; it stands for "Go – make a difference" and the blurb suggests that this conference will help young people make a difference in their school, community and church. "Four days of bible teaching, seminars, workshops, activities, plenty of time to be with friends...sharing the stories and realities of being a Christian where you are." It is based on the notion that we can make a difference, that individuals can make a difference in society by living out our faith.

Lisa Sullivan lived and worked in Washington DC. She studied at Yale, earned her PhD and then sensed a call back to the streets and forgotten children from which she had come. She created a network of youth organisations along the East Coast of the US and was just beginning to make that work when she died at the age of 40. The reason I tell you her story is to quote, what is for me, a very powerful line; when people would complain to Lisa that there are no leaders today, that there are no people making a difference she would say "we are the ones we've been waiting for!" It is based on the notion that people of faith and hope can make a difference to the world and that the world can be changed by people like us. If we won't do it, then who will? "We're the ones we've been waiting for!"

My third opening comes from the book of Judges, and is the very last words of that book: "*In those...*" (Jdg 21:25) A state of anarchy ruled in the people of God, a state of complete disorder; people did what they saw fit and it led to all kinds of ungodly and unholy behaviour; it led to all kinds of things happening that surely were mistakes and displeased God. Judges puts it down to the fact that there is no king, no authority figure, no-one to guide and lead the people in right paths and because there is no-one to guide, the people are doing their own thing and the whole life of the people of God is going down the tubes rapidly. What are they to do about it?

My task is to tell the whole story of the Bible in 8 weeks. The story so far – God made the world and everything in it; His last act of creation was to give life to people and we are made bearing the image of God. God saw all that He made and it was good. But then the world went bad: sin entered in as Adam and Eve made some bad choices; from then, and still, our world is a mix of good and bad things. People of faith like Abraham, Joseph and Moses lived out their faith in that world and last week we watched on as Moses led the people out of Egypt where they were slaves and led them towards the Promised Land, where Joshua brought them to settle down. We watched God deliver them and then begin to make them into a community of faith, with laws and rules about worship, caring for their neighbour, looking after the land. They were expected to live out that faith and obey God and respond to His love and power by living out their faith day by day. Sometimes they got it right; sometimes they got it wrong. God was with them wherever they went.

We pick the story up with these words from Judges: "*In those...*" (21:25) Things are not good; the people are in despair. Samuel, a prophet and almost the last of the Judges, is there and he has learned to listen for God's word, but the people are not listening to him; they even managed to lose the ark of the covenant to their sworn enemies, the Philistines, and though it came back, they are still not happy; they are still not sure of their future. They said to Samuel: "We want a King! A King will make everything OK again!" Till this point they had lived with the notion that God is King and so there is some sense that God is being rejected here in this desire, but God

gives them what they want and Saul is anointed king. Things begin well, but Saul and Samuel fall out because the king will not listen to the prophet; Saul discovers, as all the others will in turn, that Israel's kings are judged not on their wealth, not on their military strength and battles won, but on their ability and willingness to listen to and obey God. The degree by which they love, honour and obey God is the key to everything else.

David and Solomon will become the best of times for Israel, the golden age, when Israel is prosperous and blessed, when the people are most aware of God with them. Samuel is sent to choose David; he wants to choose the big brother, who is strong and handsome, but God says "*Do not...*" (1 Sam 16:7) David is chosen, not because he is strong, not because he is handsome, but because of the kind of man he is; he is a man of faith, a man who will listen to God and obey Him. History will tell you that, by and large, that was the kind of king David was – "*Dav had...*" (1 Kings 15:5) This man of faith made his mistakes, but God brought him back; David repented and was forgiven and while things were never quite same again, still God blessed His people through David.

We read the highlight of Solomon's kingship. Solomon has built a palace for himself, and now he builds a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem. It is his project and he has made it happen; it comes from the devotion of his heart; because he loves God, he has done this and so we come to the grand opening day. All the people are there and the ark has come into the temple and lots of sacrifices are made to please God and then "*When the...*" (1 Kings 8:10f) "*I have...*" (v13) The rest of chapter 8 is Solomon's prayer of thanks to God and then of the dedication of the temple in which he celebrates the faithfulness of God, that God keeps His promises; God has blessed Solomon and this temple is Solomon's response to this faithful God. Worship always is a response to God and this temple is a reminder to the people of the presence of God in their midst and of God's blessing on their lives. This is the best of times for Israel.

But it didn't stay that way for ever. Before the end of his life, Solomon was distracted; "*his heart ...*" (1 Kings 11:4) This was the start of the decline. The kingdom was divided into two parts: the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah, each with its own king, each with its own capital and palace. There's a little refrain that keeps appearing in the stories of the kings: "*His heart...*" (15:3) and that led to all sorts of problems. The people were led astray, and they lost their love for the Lord; other so-called 'gods' were imported and the kings did all kinds of evil things because they'd thrown off any sense of God as King. Of course, we only know about the kings; only the important people's details are recorded in the annals of history; but we also know that the nations as whole were judged by the behaviour of those in power. There were bright moments – not all of the kings were bad, but these good kings were isolated lights in a thickening darkness that would lead to judgement and exile: first the Assyrians besieged Israel and defeated them and took them away into exile and then 100 years later, Nebucadnezzar did the same to Jerusalem and Judah was defeated and the people found themselves in exile in Babylon. This was the worst of times for people of God – had God gone away?

This is not meant as a history lesson, but it does seem a world away from my Christian life and yours in 21st century Scotland; so what is the value of these stories for us? Here it is: what makes a king good? Their attitude to God made a good king; the degree to which they were obedient to God. Good kings were those who tried to make a difference to the people by loving God and obeying God's word; bad kings were those of whom it was said that their hearts were not devoted and they did evil things. The key to life for us is our attitude to Jesus: will we love, honour and obey

Jesus? Will we make Jesus the centre and heartbeat of our lives? Or will we allow ourselves to become distracted by other things and forget about Jesus and forget about faith and go our own way? The answer to that question will shape the whole of the rest of our lives. The way in which we think about Jesus will shape, guide, even control the rest of life, the way we think and behave, our values and standards.

Here's the beauty of this: people with Jesus at the centre can make a difference to the world. That's the message that SU tries to get young people to see by the very title Go MAD – that you can make a difference to your school, your community, your church; it is not always easy for a 16-year old Christian to see that you can have a positive impact on your world, but it's true. This is the message that Lisa Sullivan grasped: that people with Jesus at the centre of their lives can make a difference in the world and should work out what difference they can make; we should not sit back and wait for someone else to come along; you may be the answer to your own prayers. Jesus talks about His disciples being light and salt and the whole point of these two pictures is that we have an influence, we make a difference in the world; we make a difference just by being there, by our attitudes, by the things we say, by the way we behave. These good influences are important for our society. I've exchanged e-mails this week with Chomno and at the bottom of his email as a strap line he has this: "Transforming Cambodia one heart at a time!" That's how we make a difference.

But we can also make a difference for the worse. We see how individuals have ruined a nation's life. "Power corrupts" and we see that in the Old Testament kings; we see it in our world. You only need to look at Zimbabwe to see how power has corrupted Robert Mugabe and the impact that his bad behaviour has had on the whole nation; it was once called 'the breadbasket of Africa' but it is now starving; because of his greed he has taken its wealth and stored it in his Swiss bank accounts. If we behave badly, that too has its impact on our society, an influence in the wrong kind of way. There's something else in this famous quote: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing." (Irish Politician, Edmund Burke) Apathy; we can't be bothered; leave it to someone else; it's not my responsibility; I'm not interested; I don't see the need. That's all it takes for all kinds of evil to gain a foothold in our society. Do I overstate the case? People who were careless about their faith, who allowed their love for God to slip and slide away, who said anything goes – yes, these were the Kings in Israel, the people in power and God judged the whole nation for the failure of the kings. We're different! But only by degree – we allow our faith to slip, who knows where we end up; people of faith do nothing to influence our society, who knows where we end up.

For the Kings, the key was this: "Will I love God or not?" They influence their people either way, for good or for ill! Go – make a difference; "we are the people we've been waiting for". We can influence people for Jesus; we can influence a community for Jesus; we can influence a nation for Jesus; can we transform Scotland one heart at a time? That's what we can do; it starts with Jesus at the centre; it starts when we love, honour and obey Jesus.