Saul, the First King of Israel: a Suitable Case for Treatment? is perhaps at least an unusual opening address for a conference titled Love Me-Love My Mind (Working towards an understanding of Mental Health) – a conference no less where distinguished workshop leaders include Consultant Psychiatrist Dr Glen Cornish, and Jim Davison who is a Senior Mental Health Practitioners in his fields.

I am a Rabbi attached to the chaplaincy team here at Surrey & Borders, and, although I have been a part time chaplain in the Mental Health services for nearly 20 years, my focus is, as you might expect, not primarily on mental health and certainly not to the extent of our workshop leaders from whom you will hear a little later.

In my remarks I wanted to concentrate on a religious text or story and explore whether it could contribute towards an understanding of mental health. Would its investigation give us any pointers, relevant to mental wellbeing and ill health in the 21st century? I will introduce you to the story of King Saul; examine if and how Saul manifested mental illness, and finally I will seek to draw a number of contemporary lessons from what we have discovered.

If King Saul existed he would have lived some 3000 years ago in what we now know as the State of Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The details of Saul are recorded in the Hebrew Biblical book of 1st Samuel. The reign of Saul is suggested as c1029-1005 BCE. His father was called Kish from the tribe of Benjamin (1st Samuel 9: 1 & 21) and his home was located in Givat or Givat Shaul, north of what was to become the city of Jerusalem under his successor, David.

The name Saul – Shaul in the Hebrew comes from the root ‘to ask’ and thus Saul is the one asked, requested or even lent by God to the Israelite people when they seek a new style of leadership as the judge Samuel grows old and his sons are considered unsuitable to succeed him. To backtrack a little: the Hebrew Bible records the succession of Moses by Joshua who leads the conquest of Canaan. This is followed by a period whereby, in the face of an external threat, one or more of the Tribes of Israel appoint a clan chieftain known as a ‘Judge’, the main function of which is to repel the foreign invader.

The Judges themselves would be a fascinating group for this conference to study: the significantly left handed Ehud, the impressive Deborah, Gideon who selects his army on the basis of who laps water from the river rather than uses the hand to bring it to the mouth, Jephta who kills his own daughter having made a vow, the consequences of which he had not foreseen, the strong man Samson with his mop of hair, and finally Samuel who tries to resist the peoples demand for a central, permanent authority – a monarchy. Samuel warns that a monarch will demand military service, taxation and forced labour (1st Samuel 8: 10-18) but on God’s counsel he concedes and anoints Saul as Israel’s first king by pouring oil on his head.

The accounts of Saul’s enthronement are unclear. According to one school Saul – ‘handsome, tall and young’ – is seeking his father’s lost donkeys. Unbeknown to Saul God has revealed to Samuel that tomorrow a man from the tribe of Benjamin will be sent for anointing as monarch. In the ensuing encounter Saul accepts office modestly but on his return he is ‘seized suddenly by the spirit of God’ and begins prophesying which commentators have understood as a moment of ecstatic trance. (1st Samuel 9:1-10: 16). In an alternative account (1st Samuel 10: 17-27) Saul is selected by lot in the presence of all the
people and in yet a further story he is proclaimed king after a military victory. In any event Saul is chosen as monarch by God, and anointed by Samuel with the people’s approval.

It is at this point that I am going to suggest that Saul displays what might be considered symptoms of mental unwellness including depression, stress, paranoia and excessive jealously, and, in my view most telling of all, the Hebrew text observes on four occasions that Saul was ‘startled, terrified or assailed by an evil spirit from God’ (1st Samuel 16: 14 & 23 and 18: 10) – and I shall say more about that later.

It is hard in a few minutes to detail the evidence for my assertion but let me attempt to do so by examining Saul’s relationships with three central characters: Samuel, David and Jonathan.

It is perhaps understandable that Saul fell out with Samuel who had not only opposed the notion of a monarchy but represented the last of its predecessor institution, the Judges. From the beginning Samuel is insistent that the monarch owes allegiance to God and that he (Samuel) is God’s representative, not withstanding any political, military or other human consideration. The rift begins in the first couple of years of Saul’s reign when in a moment of impatience Saul offers the sacrifice and gives the signal for battle to commence (1st Samuel 13). On his arrival Samuel is indignant and declares (1st Samuel 13: 14) ‘But now your kingdom shall not continue’. A couple of chapters later the relationship breaks down further when Saul fails to implement Samuel’s instruction to exterminate the Amalekites.

It might be fair to surmise that Samuel’s constant criticism and rebuke of Saul contributed not only to undermining his self confidence but to the bouts of extreme mood swing and paranoia to which Saul falls victim. He may ultimately have been justified since eventually Samuel’s anoints David as king whilst Saul is still on the throne.

David has a more complex relationship with Saul. David’s eventual ascent to the throne begins in the service of Saul where once again two possibly contrary accounts are given. In the latter (1st Samuell 17: 1-18) David is a boy shepherd inexperienced in war who comes to the attention of Saul by the famous defeat of the Philistine giant, Goliath. Earlier, however, David is described as ‘skilful in playing, a man of valour, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence (1st Samuel 16: 18). Whether the start is auspicious or not, David soon makes his reputation as a military leader and receives both rank and the hand in marriage of the daughter of King Saul. He forms a much written about and deep friendship with Saul’s older son, Jonathan. David’s growing popularity (1st Samuel 18: 7, 21: 11 and 29: 5) arouse the suspicions of Saul who fears that David will lead a coup. David is forced to flee and does, in fact, become a focal point for those who are disappointed with Saul’s leadership. (1st Samuel 22: 2).

I will say more about David and Saul in a moment but what of Jonathan who will die in battle at Gilboa alongside his father (1st Samuel 31). Jonathan, Saul’s eldest son, receives an idealised portrayal with only endearing qualities. He is heroic and loyal to his father in all but one aspect – his genuine friendship with David. The friendship of David with Jonathan which is attested to in David’s lament (2nd Samuel 1: 17-27) does not escape Saul’s moody wrath. In 1st Samuel 20 the absence of David leads to an exchange between father and son in which Jonathan questions Saul’s desire for the death of David. In an explosion of anger it is recorded ‘And Saul threw his spear at him to strike him’.

Nevertheless, it is to Saul’s relationship with David that I wish to conclude this section. On four occasions, as I suggested earlier, Saul is tormented by an evil spirit from God. Perhaps I ought to let the text speak for itself:

10 The next day a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand. 11 And Saul hurled the spear, for he
thought, “I will pin David to the wall.” But David evaded him twice. (1st Samuel 18: 10 &11).

And again

9 Then a harmful spirit from the LORD came upon Saul, as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand. And David was playing the lyre. 10 And Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall. And David fled and escaped that night. (1st Samuel 19: 9&10)

14 Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the LORD tormented him. 15 And Saul's servants said to him, “Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. 16 Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well.” 17 So Saul said to his servants, “Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me.” 18 One of the young men answered, “Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the LORD is with him.” 19 Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, “Send me David your son, who is with the sheep.” 20 And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul. 21 And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. 22 And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.” 23 And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him. (1st Samuel 16: 14-23)

The Bible reminds us how potentially hazardous therapeutic work can be!

There are two possible ways of reading this story. The first is to conclude that Saul has fallen prey to mental illness and that all the behaviours to which I have alluded are typical symptoms of mental instability. Had Saul not been the subject of ‘a harmful spirit’ and the accompanying mood swings and paranoia he may have coped far better with the events in his reign and been remembered as a successful king.

The alternative interpretation is more understanding of the impact of events on Saul. In this scenario, Saul is catapulted into high office for which he is ill-prepared and finds himself in a situation over which he has little control. He is a transitional man between the end of the Judges and the advent of a highly skilled delegator and manipulator, David.

If you accept the latter, then the advice Saul needed was simply to abdicate and remove himself from the situation in which he found himself. Although time does not permit I recommend to you Saul at his most dignified towards the end of his life (1st Samuel Chapter 28) where he summons the spirit of Samuel through the offices of the Witch of Endor.
If you accept the former then Saul does indeed prove a suitable case for treatment. Given that
But above all what does the case of Saul teach a person in the 21st century who wishes to expand his or her understanding of mental health?
I am going to suggest six things:
First, mental illness does not discriminate by virtue of position or any other human attribute. While some types of person may be more or less susceptible, while some communities may appear to have higher incidence, mental illness can inflict its terrible price on those of high status or low, rich or poor, fortunate or deprived. King Saul occupied the highest office, had military power and wealth, and had a loving and loyal son.
Second, mental illness impacts not only upon the individual but particularly on their closest family too and the example of Jonathan is a stark reminder. What must Jonathan have felt at his father’s rage? How often are the families of the mentally ill the forgotten victims as we rightly concentrate on the service user?
Third, there may be circumstances which exacerbate mental disorder. I am reminded of the old joke when Golda Meir, the Prime Minister of Israel, met the American President. The President remarked, “Madame Prime Minister, do you realise I am the President of two hundred million people.” Golda Meir is said to have retorted, “That is nothing. I am the Prime Minister of two million Prime Ministers.” Leading the Jewish people has historically proved to be a challenge, and perhaps the effort of King Saul to lead the Israelites was a task of great stress in which a predecessor constantly carping from the side lines might have been enough to tip even the most balanced.
Fourth, sometimes life is as tough as it seems and the Saul example reminds us that we may have good grounds for our fears and distress. Perhaps Saul was right to fear David’s ambitions but those fears overwhelmed him to the extent that he reacted irrationally. The task maybe to help people find strategies that help them cope with external events so that they do not feel overwhelmed.
Fifth, mental distress is often expressed in religious language and chaplains in particularly need to ensure that our rituals and linguistics do not leave individuals adrift with guilt, rejection and fear. 
Sixth and finally, the image of David’s lyre playing soothing a spirit as troubled as Saul’s demonstrates that sometimes the presence of a human being and non-verbal communication can bring comfort to the tortured soul.
I may not have persuade you that Saul is a suitable case for treatment but I hope I have convinced you that Saul is a fascinating case for study.

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