

## Sermon Isaiah 37, Sunday 22 January 2023

We hear in our reading today a message that we should take to heart even the mightiest kings on Earth can not stop Gods plan for his world. Our prayers are part of that plan and heard by God.

The prelude to the passage is the Assyrian empire attacking Judah. Taking all the cities and besieging Jerusalem. We are told of these events from Jerusalem perspective as they receive several mocking and threatening letters and messages from the king of Assyria. About how pathetic their armies, allies and God are, telling them they will destroy Jerusalem just as they have destroyed everyone else who has opposed them. There is no hope in resisting there is even an offer made to anyone in Jerusalem to defect and be saved. The situation is hopeless, imaging the worst news possible, terrible news and added to that the knowledge that you can do nothing about it! you do not have the power to change the situation. This is the news that Judah faces, but in the reading, Hezekiah does do something about it he takes it to God in prayer.

The Assyrian threat which has been a major theme in Isaiah is ended in this passage, ended in answer to prayer and in accordance with Gods will. Apart from one verse in the next chapter and a passing reference in chapter 52 they are done.

The bad guys in the book so far have been the Assyrians they have had unprecedented military success in the preceding years and are the dominant power in the near east. The king now is Sennacherib the son of Sargon who conquered Israel. After Sargon's death many of the conquered regions rebelled and he begins his reign winning them back. Many of you will have heard the phrase 'History is written by the winners' and Assyria were winning. Accounts

of History often make the victor look great, as the defeated peoples rendered voiceless can become cartoon bad guys, we maybe can even see some hints of this in the recording of Israel's own history in earlier sections of the Bible. But we don't have it here. We have three accounts of this event in the bible in 2kings 18, 2 Chronicles 32 and here in Isaiah. Each account is similar but not the same. Today we also have three clay prisms that came from Sennachirib's own court they are carved pillars of stone about the half a metre tall: the Taylor prism in the British museum, the Oriental prism in the Oriental institute of Chicago and the Jerusalem Prism in the Israel Museum. These amazing and priceless artifacts give the official record of his military campaigns in the Near east. And this incident gets a mention. All the accounts both biblical and archaeological have him all but conquering Judah, taking many fortified cities and eventually laying siege to Jerusalem itself, the prisms and some biblical sources have Hezekiah paying a large tribute to the king in an effort to buy off the attack.

They all agree on important thing as well though, Jerusalem does not fall, even in his own court many miles away in Nineveh the king could not lie and say he won, the fact he failed must have been common knowledge in the region. If he had destroyed Hezekiah or Jerusalem, he would have bragged about it for sure. The prisms not unsurprisingly do not mention the loss or defeat of his army, so silence from them on the reason that Jerusalem still stands.

The reason we have In today's reading is 185000 people being put to death by the angel of the Lord. A crazy number, even if the absurd size of Assyria's armies is taken into account. Many commentators suggest the agent of this was virulent disease running rife through the siege camps (even then COVID was an issue!!). Whether the number is accurate, a copy mistake or

exaggeration doesn't matter. what matters that outside the walls of Jerusalem something happened to turn the armies back to Nineveh in the middle of a huge military campaign. Leaving the city unconquered.

We know through Isaiah the architect of this was the Lord our God in answer to the prayers of his people.

We have come through quite a lot of the book now with another recurring theme 'are you going to trust God or are you going to rely on yourselves or on other nations to protect you'. This theme is explored this week in Hezekiah's trust and prayer to God and Gods answer to that prayer. Hezekiah has finally realized his mistake in ignoring Isaiah and relying on Egypt and pleads to God for aid. You might think that with his kingdom in ruins and capital city under siege it is a bit late for that. But its never to late to place your trust in God, he can redeem even the most hopeless situations.

we started the book with Ahaz on the throne of Judah and now we have his son Hezekiah.

We hear elsewhere in the bible that Hezekiah was a 'just' King, in 2Kings 18:5 it states "No king of Judah among either his predecessors or successors could be compared to him" he enacted religious reforms including a strict mandate for the sole worship of Yahweh and a prohibition on the veneration of other Gods in the Temple of Jerusalem. We know that has been an issue haunting the people from the beginning and a barrier to their relationship with God.

The revelation to the people of Israel unfolds in the Bible and although the way we organise the books isn't strictly chronological, there is development in how God is viewed and reveals himself. Here if you have a bible open, we are around halfway through. The idea that all other Gods are false has been

established and is further cemented here by the prophet Isaiah. Some earlier passages, books and psalms are not explicit about that truth, instead they read like Our God is just the best or most powerful one. But the book of Isaiah never compromises like some of the unjust Kings or people around about, there is one true everlasting God, and he is in covenant relationship with his people. So, it is often the mark of a 'just' king that they end idolatry. Respect for Hezekiah from the Jews in the future even extends to him being mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus at the start of the Gospel of Matthew.

He is a Godly man and as such Hezekiah takes this situation to God in prayer.

Here we have a quote from Mother Teresa 'Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God'

So, Hezekiah does just that, He doesn't sugar coat anything or hid from the facts the Assyrian's had conquered many cities and destroyed their Gods and religions, Jerusalem did not have a hope of repelling the attack. He is truly honest about the situation an honesty that can sometimes be hard to pray with.

I don't know why that is but it is true,

God knows the reality of our situations always, the state of our hearts and minds, yet it can sometimes be very hard to bring it all to him to place all of ourselves in his hands. Our doubts, our fears, our anger. The book of Psalms contains some searingly honest prayers as the authors pour out their anger and disgust at what God is doing. Praying honestly is something we perhaps could all practice more.

This Honest prayer contains a hard truth, the message from the Assyrian heralds wasn't that God wanted them to win they were saying he was powerless to stop them. All other Gods had been defeated by them and the God Yahweh would be no different. Hezekiah prays that God would defend his honour in the world. It is a prayer based on Gods own Character, 'all glory and honour are his' it is not a manipulative 'did you hear what he called you? Rather an Honest 'let him know he is wrong' one, we learn from Jesus God always acts in line with his character, he can act no other way, when our prayers line up with our understanding of Gods character as Hezekiah's did here, we pray into this truth not a 'petty if you love me you will do this and this' but deep trusting understanding that 'your will be done' takes precedent. Aligning our prayers with Gods Character and will is something we could all work on in our prayer lives.

Hezekiah prays: Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD, are the only God

God hears that prayer and responds that the arrogance of the Assyrian king has not gone unnoticed and will not go unpunished. He is the one true God of the universe, and the Assyrians were about to learn what that means. All they had achieved thus far was as a result of His hand, not theirs, part of His plan and no one else's. Works of wood and stone destroyed by them in fire are not Gods there is only one God, and he is no longer on the Assyrians team.

In addition, God offers Hezekiah a sign, he want his people to be fruitful in the land and has purposes for them as yet unfulfilled there should be no doubt in his ability to achieve them. God validates his answer with a sign, one which perhaps we should take note of is going to take years to develop. Years to prove true, do we have faith like that, not an instant correction but a plan

coming together over years. After years would we even remember that we had asked God for help? The sign given is this: in a land which has been devastated by war making all agriculture impossible God will provide enough uncultivated food to preserve the survivors and after two years of this and them repairing the land in the third year they will once again be able to eat what they produce. Trust in the Lord for your very existence and the years will reveal the truth of his goodness.

The conclusion of Gods answer to the prayer in 33-35 deserves repeating:

“Therefore, this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria: “He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it.

By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city,” declares the LORD.

“I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!”

What I want to point out is the miraculous defence of Jerusalem is accomplished for God’s sake and the sake of his servant David. Not because they were more worthy than anyone else or they had reached the desired prayer threshold or unlocked a secret code for making God act. God saved it for his purposes, which are just and good and true. We are told he works all things together for good. The city he saves and its future people have a role in the future of the salvation of the world. In the life and death of his Son our Lord Jesus.

I don't think it would be too much of a stretch to think that perhaps this wasn't the first time someone in Jerusalem had prayed to God for deliverance. The invading army has been coming for a while and is now visible outside the walls, I would think many people prayed many times and this brings us to the mystery of prayer and petition.

Although we hear Jesus say 'whatever you ask in my name will be granted' in the Gospels. That sometimes seems not to be the reality of our daily lives. The answer to a prayer can be yes, or no or wait, not yet. The answer can come in unexpected ways very far from the way we imagined it turning out. Seeing that a prayer has been answered can sometimes be difficult.

There was a film in the early 2000's called Bruce Almighty where God gives a man the power to run the world for a while. His response to a deluge of prayer requests is 'yes to all'. And that is an unmitigated disaster!! we don't know the ends from the beginnings how the fabric of History is stitched together but God does. We may pray for things that aren't good for us or those around us, we may pray for the same thing as countless others when only one can have it (a particular job say). A good, just, loving God can't say yes to prayers like that.

When we talk to each other of answered prayers we should always do so with humility. We don't know why God would answer our prayer in the way that we want, but not an identical one from our friends or neighbours, that will always be a mystery to us so. We do know that it is not because we are better or more worthy than them. Sharing answers to prayer is an important part of Christian life it is so encouraging to hear about Gods care for his people and his world, the miraculous answer to Hezekiah's prayer is a prime example. We should celebrate that God saved the city from its enemies saved the Davidic line from destruction as this was part of his eternal plan in placing Jesus into the world at

a time and place pre-ordained. To have designs on the Holy City is to have designs on the Holy one of Israel himself it is not against flesh and blood Sennacherib fights but against the one true God. Even the mightiest kings on Earth cannot stop Gods plan for his world. Please over coffee this morning take some time to talk to each other about prayer, please know that it is messy, difficult and frustrating for me and I'm sure some others,

My prayers can often look like this (last slide)

Just to hear that from each other might lighten the load a bit for someone else who is struggling with the same thing. Our spiritual lives are of course between us and God, but they are also shared between each other. If we bottle up our emotions that can become confusing and overwhelming leading us to dark places. If we bottle up our faith lives then surely the same is true. Talk to each other about our faith and We must give it all to God, praise, hope, fear, joy, anger, love. Swear words and tears included. He is our loving father who delights in hearing our prayers and is big enough to take everything we can throw at him and more.

Amen