

Isaiah 36 Sermon

Church on the Corner

36 In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. 2 The king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. He stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field. 3 And there came out to him Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder.

4 The Rabshakeh said to them, 'Say to Hezekiah: Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you base this confidence of yours? 5 Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? On whom do you now rely, that you have rebelled against me? 6 See, you are relying on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him. 7 But if you say to me, "We rely on the Lord our God", is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, "You shall worship before this altar"? 8 Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. 9 How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? 10 Moreover, is it without the Lord that I have come up against this land to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it.'

Introduction

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

Doing right even when things are going wrong.

At the very heart of the book of Isaiah is a dramatic change of genre. In chapter 36 Isaiah switches from prophecy to narrative and tells the story of King Hezekiah. It is clearly a crucial story - (it actually gets told three times in the Old Testament in Chronicles, Kings and here in Isaiah). But it isn't clear what we should make of it. Is Hezekiah a hero of faith? Or is he ultimately the cause of the fall of Jerusalem. Whatever the answer this is the crux of the book. and it is a great story.

Hezekiah faces the crisis of his life. The enemy are at the gate. What will he do with the time that is given to him?

He was one of the kings 'who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord' he was a reformer of religion and nation. (that is the reference in v7 - he removed the altars from the high places and restored temple worship).

But now is his greatest challenge.

Ch 36v1 The thing that they were most afraid of, the looming power of Assyria turns its attention on Jerusalem.

What must Hezekiah have thought?

After all that I have done - now this. And what must the people have thought? We trusted Hezekiah - now look.

The test of us is not who we are when times are good, but who we are when things go wrong. We don't do right in order for everything to go well for us. We do right because it is right.

Do not think that doing right means God owes you an easy life. The purposes of God are far bigger than you. What is Hezekiah going to do?

The enemy at the Gate.

Circa 700BC Assyria is the great power, dominating the region North of Israel
The Rabshakeh - was a prince of Assyria, chief cupbearer and envoy. He leads an army to the walls of Jerusalem.

And now "*He stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field*"
He knows the weakness of Jerusalem is its water supply. (Thus the tunnel of Siloam)
And he tried to break the spirit of the people with threats, lies and fear.

He says what do you think you can trust in?

Egypt? *"v6 See, you are relying on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him."*

God? He plays on religious division *v7 But if you say to me, "We rely on the Lord our God", is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed*
He twists the words of scripture. v10 Essentially saying 'I am Gods judgment'

This is what corrupt power does. It plays on fear, seeks to divide, confuse and deceive in order to weaken opposition.

The pressure is on Hezekiah

v18 "Do not let Hezekiah mislead you by saying, The Lord will save us. Has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?" How will Hezekiah respond?

Ch37v1 he tears his clothes - and puts on sackcloth - outward signs of repentance. He seems to humble himself before God.

But he sends messengers to Isaiah to pray. *v4 It may be that the Lord your God heard the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the Lord your God has heard; therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left.'*

It looks right - but the sense is that something isn't right here. Why does he send messengers and why does he ask Isaiah to pray for them?

v5-6 Isaiah responds by essentially saying trust in God. Stand firm, carry on doing what you should have been doing all along. What is the response? To stand firm in the face of fear and darkness. Don't be afraid, and certainly don't give in to it.

When things go wrong our faith is often shaken. We doubt Gods love. Don't be surprised at the corruption of people. But this is when faith matters most.

Know that God is still in charge.

Even when it seems impossible. And don't believe the hype. Human power is always far less than it makes out. There is always an element of smoke & mirrors. And those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

God says v7 I myself will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumour, and return to his own land; I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land."

Isn't it interesting - all that it takes is a rumour - a whisper in the ear. The treacherous will always be afraid of treachery. The deceitful are never able to trust.

Sure enough there hear a rumour of an insurgency to the should and the Envoy returns to find that the king of Assyria has been dragged into another war

Trust me says God. I will work out my purposes. Set your sights on me.

The letter

The Assyrians may be distracted but, they haven't gone away. And so in **v9** So like a bad debt collector they sends a threatening letter to Hezekiah. Don't think you have got away with this - we haven't forgotten you.

But this time Hezekiah responds differently.

v14-15 He is no longer afraid. He goes up to the house of the Lord himself, and prays a prayer not about how great he is and how much God owes him. But about God and his purposes.

v20 "So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord."

Something has changed in him. Or he has remembered something he had forgotten.

He is Humble and faithful. A worshipper, not just a king.

And Isaiah sees it **v21** "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Because you have prayed to me concerning King Sennacherib of Assyria..."

Now don't let me suggest that pray simply solves all problems. But when you face a crisis don't just let people to pray on behalf. The greatest privilege is that we are invited into the presence of God - each of us. And our first concern should not be ourself, but the Glory of God. "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be give to you as well"

And as a result of his prayer he gets this word from God. (v21-35)

Now what is interesting about this, is i don't think that Hezekiah's prayer changes things - God is working out his purposes anyway. But Hezekiah gets an insight into what is going on, and he gets to be part of the story.

It is a really interesting insight into prayer isn't it? Does prayer change things? Sometimes. But it always changes us. We pray because it changes us, aligns us with Gods purposes.

We pray so that we might see and understand.

Justin Welby talking about suffering in Job. "And then I saw the Lord".

Hezekiah gets a glimpse of the purposes of God and it all makes sense.

The House of cards collapses

It is brilliantly almost a footnote. v36-38 is the end of Sennacherib. Isaiah doesn't really care about the details.

The angel of the lord strikes down the army and then in v38 Sennacherib is murdered by his own sons. Those who live by the sword die by the sword.

So there is the end of one story. And the end of one half of the book of Isaiah. And if it ended there Hezekiah would be a hero of faith, a good king who trusted God.

But that is not the end.

It begins with Hezekiah's illness.

Ch 38 'Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.' But Hezekiah prays this prayer...

v3 'Remember now, O Lord, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Commentators are divided over this. Is it true? I'm not sure it is. "I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight."

Yes to doing good. But wholehearted? faithfulness?

Weeping bitterly? Grief yes, but is this a mark of faith?

But anyway - God answers his prayer.

Okay then. You can have more time.

v 5 'Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life.'

The man who lived to long.

Be careful what you wish for.

Then Ch 39 Unforeseen consequences and careless arrogance.

v1 At that time King Merodach-baladan son of Baladan of Babylon sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered.

Does anyone see the flashing warding lights?

Babylon should have set off alarm bells. But what was Hezekiah to do. Babylon was small and insignificant.

When Isaiah questions him saying **v3** 'What did these men say? From where did they come to you?' Hezekiah answered, 'They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon.'

They are from far away.

The Isaiah asks "What have they seen?" **v4**

And hezekiah says - I showed them everything - all my treasure.

"5 Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: 6 Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. 7 Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.'

What has he done? History records him as the man whose carelessness invites the Babylonian Invasion. The man who lived to long.

What a great story. But what does it all mean?

As ever with these stories - there isn't a simple purpose to it. We learn the lessons of history otherwise we are condemned to repeat them.

Isaiah's insight into Hezekiah. There is this moment at the end. This slip of the tongue by Hezekiah that betrays his heart.

v8 Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, 'The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'There will be peace and security in my days.'

Good? That Jerusalem will be carried into exile?

There is Isaiah's observation, his final word on Hezekiah. Great king? Maybe. He did good. But he was always more concerned with his own reputation than doing good for others.

He never really escaped the fatal trap of self-centredness.

He never managed to humble himself - to be servant and worshipper more than king.

Conclusion.

This is the great danger of status, of reputation. Of worrying more about what people think of us than of doing what is right.

And this is not just for Old Testament Kings. You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

God brings in his kingdom by his spirit. And that means by using those whom he has given his spirit to. You have the opportunity in this life to participate in the kingdom. To leave a better legacy than Hezekiah.

Be people of heartfelt prayer, and humble service.

Trust in God, even in the darkest of times.

Do what is right without need for recognition or reward.

Live for a better tomorrow.