

The church is in decline. A headline in one of the papers back in March said “Just 800,000 worshippers attend a Church of England service on the average Sunday” and then made the following points

- Numbers in the pews have fallen to less than half the levels of the 1960s
- Census evidence shows a widespread fall in allegiance to Christianity
- Numbers of Christians has fallen more than four million in a decade

However, it would seem to many that numbers is the least of the church’s problems in that the church has in many areas moved away from a traditional and biblical belief to embrace the ethos of the day. Things the church would not have embraced 20 years ago it now seems to fully embrace.

A number of us view this with sadness.

In the light of this I would ask a question “what does the church need now?”

I think it is a pertinent question as we look at king Josiah in the conclusion of our ‘I’m a king get me out of here’ series.

Josiah became king about 640BC. He became king at a bad time. There had been the best part of 60 years of spiritual decline before he came to the throne. His grandfather Manasseh had reigned for 55 years and “he did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Kings 21:2). It was a time of idolatry as he “rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed” (2 Kings 21:3). It was a time of apostasy as he desecrated the temple courts, “he built altars to the starry hosts” (2 Kings 21:5-7). It was a time of pagan activity “he sacrificed his own son “ (2 Kings 21:6) and of plain murder “Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood” (2 Kings 21:16). Manasseh was replaced for two years by his son Amon who followed in his father’s footsteps (2 Kings 21:20).

Then came Josiah, who was just 8 years old when he came to the throne.

A new king and therefore the possibility of a new start.

### **1. what did God’s people need?**

In one sense you don’t have to be a theologian to know what God’s people needed. Zephaniah who prophesied at the time of Josiah said, “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger.” (Zeph 2:3)

They needed to seek God but clearly they had lost the means to do that. Do you use satnav? It strikes me that in using satnav people have lost the ability to read a map or even use common sense.

A couple of years back there was a story of a woman who by following satnav ended up in deep water . Her satnav sent her down a winding track usually used only by farmers in their 4x4s.

Although the track is signposted as ‘unsuitable for motor vehicles’, the driver carried on and found

herself at a ford. Still accepting what the satnav told her, she set out to cross the ford, but it was swollen after days of heavy rain. Her car was swept 600 yards downstream, bouncing from one bank of the river to the other as the woman frantically tried to escape.

God's people, as Josiah came to the throne, had lost the map and were being bounced from one false god to the next, drowning in idolatry and sin. To call to them to seek God was right but impossible because God's people had really lost God.

Then along comes Josiah. What we see in Josiah is God giving to his people a king a leader who would bring the people back to God and as we read these two chapters in 2 Kings about his life we see a number of things he did, under God, which helped people seek and draw close to God.

#### **a. the book discovered and read v1-10**

In rebuilding the temple the book of the law was found. It's not clear what was meant by the book of the law, it was probably a large part of Deuteronomy, but the point is that it was lost and needed to be "discovered". It is mind boggling. God's people who are often called the people of the book had lost the book, the means of hearing from God. It was the word of God and his written law which had shaped them as his people but that word had disappeared from amongst his people. No wonder they were lost and following every false god imaginable!

God's command to his people in Deut 6 had been, "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."

But instead the book of the law had been forgotten.

And what of the church today? The Bible is accessible to every person in this country and not by chance but by the effort of great men of the past. William Tyndale was involved in the early translation of the Bible and in 1536 martyred for his faith. His famous quote speaking against the Pope and the Catholic hierarchy who opposed his efforts to put the Bible in the hand of the common person said, "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture, than he dost."

We have the Bible but sadly in many churches it is if not forgotten then at best paid lip service to and what rules the church is human reason rather than God through his word. The church of today like the people of God then has lost the word of God.

Then, under Josiah, as the temple was restored the book was found and brought to Josiah by Shaphan the secretary who read it to Josiah. Clearly both Hilkiah, the high priest who found it, and

Shaphan knew what this book was and that it was important. However, it had been buried by Manasseh both literally and metaphorically so how would Josiah respond to it?

### **b. the King's response v11-13**

the immediate response was that he tore his robes, a sign of anguish and repentance. The word made an immediate impact on the king. As it was read he realised how far his people and perhaps he himself had strayed from God. He realised v 13 that God's anger was set against his people because they had not obeyed this book. That is often how it works isn't it? The word of God cuts through the false perception that we have that we are pretty good people living pretty good lives as it shines the beam of God's light into the mess of our lives. It is often for that very reason that we try and hide the word of God because it can be uncomfortable. But here Josiah didn't hide the word, he didn't hide from it, nor did he ignore it when it spoke even though what God had to say was uncomfortable.

This is the way of God's people, listening to the word and responding to it. Solomon is known as the wise king but wouldn't Jesus describe Josiah as a wise king as we apply his words from Matt 7:24 to Josiah, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man". I wonder if we are regularly opening ourselves to the word of God and allowing God to speak to us, not always to challenge us but also to bring encouragement and comfort. Do you have regular times of Bible reading? Do you have the notes that help you both to read the Bible regularly and to understand and apply what you read? And then are you doing what God says?

As individual Christians and as a church what we need is to hear God's word and then to respond to that word, often that will be in repentance as we see how far God's church in this country has moved away from God and his will.

The second part of the response was to send to Huldah the prophetess to see what God had in store for his people.

The response would not have been what he wanted to hear. Huldah made it clear that God in his wrath was going to act against his people but only after Josiah's death because Josiah was seeking to walk with God.

That however did not prevent Josiah from acting and from seeking to lead the people back to God.

The fire may, as it were, have been burning the building of the people of God but that didn't mean it was pointless trying to rescue some from the fire of God's wrath.

As we look at the church today we may well be tempted to despair and as we look at the world around even more so. But we need to continue to faithfully preach and live the gospel so that we can help others to find faith, grow in that faith and be secure in that faith and so help some from the fire to safety.

### **c. true leadership 22:1-3**

Josiah didn't just hear the word and react dramatically to it himself, he began to lead the people to do what God's word said. So he went to the temple 23:2 with the leaders of the people and read to them what had been read to him. What was he hoping for? Presumably that the word would have the impact on them that it had had on him. Next week here at Christ Church we start a new sermon series. We will look at various New Testament passages that deal with the church and how we grow together. My hope is that the impact God's word has had on me and which leads me to commit myself to the church in general and to this church specifically will impact others of us and so help us grow together committed to each other, sharing with each other and helping each other. That is the hope, that the word of God which has had an effect on the leader will also speak clearly to the people.

Josiah did other practical things like removing from the temple all the paraphernalia of the worship of the false gods and removing the high places where false gods had been worshipped. He did this because, as we saw last week with Hezekiah, the bad need to be removed that the good might flourish.

Finally 23:21 he called the people to celebrate the Passover, the remembrance of God's mighty act of salvation, even, as we read in 2 Chronicles, providing 30,000 sheep so that the sacrifice could be made. The point to be noted is that as God's leader he did everything to help the people in their relationship with God. He got rid of the things that would stop them worshipping God and did all he could to help them worship God.

As such God's verdict on him was positive, 2 Kings 23:25, "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses". Can you see that? God's command was love the Lord your God with all your heart mind soul and strength. Josiah did just that.

This is true leadership and what the church needs in every age is true leaders who will take the word of God seriously in their own lives and then hold it before the people and call the people to take it seriously in their lives and live in holiness with God removing the obstacles to that holiness of life and enabling holiness to flourish amongst the people of God. Pray that in our day God would give us leaders like Josiah.

## **2. The reality of judgement 23:26**

However, Josiah knew that his best efforts could not save the people from the wrath of God. That was what Huldah had said and so while he might rescue some from the burning building, ultimately the building would be destroyed.

So immediately after that glowing tribute to Josiah we read, "Nevertheless, the Lord did not turn away from the heat of his fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh

had done to arouse his anger. So the Lord said, "I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, 'My Name shall be there.' (2 Kings 23:26-27)

The revival under Josiah was not enough. He was a king too late. God's course of action was decided and within about 25 years of Josiah's death the Babylonian forces would, under God's sovereign rule, come and bring God's wrath upon his people, destroy Jerusalem and take its people into captivity. Judgement was certain as Huldah had said and as happened. Good as Josiah was he could not remove God's wrath and so, as with all the other kings he makes us look for a better a greater king who can take away God's wrath and that of course is king Jesus. All the kings we have looked at were flawed and so point us to the one true king who was without sin and who died on a cross to take away the sin of the world and with it God's wrath.

However, that was beyond Josiah and the certainty he lived with was that God's wrath would come. So when we ask what did God's people then need, the answer is nothing because already it was too late. God was about to act against them in wrath.

Today in his mercy God holds back his wrath to allow us time to repent and turn back to him.

However, the judgement is still real and there will come a day when the Lord Jesus Christ returns in power to judge. While we wait for that day we have the opportunity to lead people to the safety of faith in Christ Jesus.

Josiah was a great king in that coming as he did into a situation where God was ignored and his word hidden he took the word of God seriously, lived it and taught it and encouraged the people to live in obedience to the word of God.

Yes ultimately he could not prevent the judgement of God falling upon a sinful people but for a while under his leadership the word of God was taken seriously and people were brought back to God.

What does the church in our day need? It needs similar leaders who will take God's word seriously and use it to help restore people to God and secure them in their faith and through that bring others to faith in Jesus.

Let's pray that God would give us such leaders in our day and then let us be those who when the word is read and preached to us respond positively to that word and live holy and godly lives.