

Isaiah 37:1-20 Christ Church 31st May 2015

You may have seen the advert in which two climbers are at the top of a cliff presumably about to abseil down and checking the rope. One looks at its frayed nature and asks the other about it and he replies that the guy in the store said it was almost as good as your standard rope. Meanwhile behind them a guy is seen getting a new rope out of his Volkswagen and as he shuts the door the first guy turns his head sees him and his rope and looks thoughtful as if to say I've got the wrong rope. The words "you get what you pay for" come up.

The advert raises the question of confidence and trust, of putting your confidence in the right place. We are going this morning to dip into Isaiah 36-39 and these chapters are all about confidence and where it should be placed.

The issue for the people of God as we see in Isa 36:1-2 was the threat of the Assyrian forces, "In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. Then the king of Assyria sent his field commander with a large army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem."

The question was how could God's people stand against the forces arrayed against them?

It was not an unusual situation for the people of God. Back in Isaiah 7 it had been the king of Aram doing the threatening and, despite Isaiah telling the then king Ahaz not to be afraid but to rely on God, he had made an alliance with Assyria. Hezekiah, while ruling with his father Ahaz, sought to make an alliance with Egypt to escape from Assyria.

But now Assyrian forces are at the gates of Jerusalem and the question is where will Hezekiah look for help? Will he put his confidence in other nations or will he look to God?

Well this time he looks to God and in Chap 37 we see Hezekiah's dual response to the Assyrian threat. Firstly he repented of his lack of trust in God, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth, and secondly he turned to God for help, he "went into the temple of God" (v1).

As part of that turning to trust in God he contacted Isaiah to ask him to pray and to hear God's word from him.

The response of Isaiah (v6-7) was that Hezekiah should not be afraid because God would return Sennacherib to his own land and then cut him down.

By the time a second missive was sent to Hezekiah calling him to surrender he seems to have got this faith thing because a. he prayed himself (v14-15) rather than getting Isaiah to do it and then b. he listened to God's word through Isaiah. Through Isaiah God spoke against Sennacherib and he spoke to Hezekiah. Finally what God had said came about and the forces of Sennacherib were destroyed (v36) and when he went back to his own land Sennacherib was killed (v38) just as God had said.

That is a quick run through these two chapters. Now I'd like to see what these chapters have to say to us and as we are thinking about how we grow in our relation with God I want first to look at what we can learn about God here and then a little of what it means for us to put our confidence in God.

1. What we can learn about God

I was looking through some old photos recently and reflecting that I don't think I have changed at all over the years... Well OK I have but even in the earliest photos you can still see it is me and the same essential person is there.

At times I have heard people talk about the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New as if some how they are different. That is not so. God does not change and so what we can learn about God from the Old Testament and from places like Isaiah is relevant to our New Testament faith.

In these Chapters we see much about God and I just want to draw out three things.

a. God is the one who rules the nations

We see clearly the arrogant and ignorant claims of the Assyrian commander, ""Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The Lord will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?" (Isaiah 36:18). The question was who rules over the nations? The Assyrians felt that they did and that no nation or its god could stand against the might of the Assyrian war machine.

However we see from the lips of Hezekiah a different perspective, ""O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth." (Isaiah 37:16).

Here is the truth about God that "you alone O Lord are God" (v20).

Our God is the creator God who has made the world and who rules over the nations. The point for Hezekiah in his day and for us in our day is who else should we put our confidence in? Who else holds more power than our God?

One morning a couple of weeks ago in different ways I was made aware in quick succession of three quite serious pastoral issues. I thought woah where did that come from? I also recognised that in each situation there was little or nothing I could do to change what was going on except of course to pray. I could bring these things before the God who is enthroned on high and who rules over the whole of creation. So I did. I prayed and in confidence in his power I left the situations with him. This is our God who alone rules over the nations and in whom we can have confidence.

We can have confidence because our God is not detached from us and that is what we see here for

b. God speaks to his people to reassure them

In vs 21-35 we see God's word through Isaiah to Hezekiah. Part of it is God speaking against Sennacherib denouncing his arrogance and announcing his demise and part is a message to Hezekiah

of assurance culminating in the words, ““I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!”(Isaiah 37:35).

But the point for us is that God has heard Hezekiah’s prayer and God speaks to him in response and he speaks to reassure him that he has put his confidence and trust in the right place.

I would be very surprised if there is not someone here this morning who has come with concerns on their heart and mind. It may be issues you face yourself or someone close to you is facing and at the moment you cannot see a way forward. It is to you especially that God is speaking through his word this morning to reassure you that he is aware of your situation he is in control and he will answer your prayer. In short he is saying to you is that you can have confidence in him.

However, this again emphasises our need to keep coming back to the word of God to hear God speak to us and to find that reassurance that we so often need as we live in a world which is hostile to God and to his people. Are you listening to the word of God? Are you listening now as we open it together this morning? Are you listening at home as you read the Bible in your own time of quiet? I know people will say we can hear God in other ways and perhaps we can but we hear God supremely through his written word so don’t cut off this means of God speaking to you.

But of course God doesn’t just speak

c. God faithfully acts to deliver his people

In the first of this series we saw God’s desire to bring his people back to himself and here we see that desire repeated but more we see God acting to bring it about.

Look with me at Isaiah 37:32, “For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.” Here is God promising to act to save his people. I love that phrase “the zeal of the Lord will accomplish this”.

What God is saying here is that what he says will not come about by human action but only through God’s passionate involvement with his people. The word “zeal” the power of God’s love which moves him to make his people’s cause his own and a passionate commitment to them to the end that nothing should hurt or destroy them. God is passionately committed to his people to save and protect them and in his power he will do it.

Many of you will be aware if the Idea of a line manager. A person who as your manager is meant to be your champion, looking after your interests, helping you to move forward in the work place and generally speaking on your behalf.

Hezekiah knew God would champion his people. This was why Hezekiah was right to put his confidence in God and why we are right to do the same because God is committed to his people and he not only speaks good things to us but he is faithful to act on our behalf for our best.

I remember my final interview with our College principal. At the end, before he prayed with me, he gave me a verse from the Bible to remember and hold on to. He spoke God's word to me and I heard it. The verse was, "He who calls you is faithful and he will do it" (1Thess 5:24). The zeal of the Lord has accomplished a lot of things over these many years. The King's trustworthiness encourages to put our confidence and trust in him.

2. What can we learn about faith?

There's a game people play in which you have to think which animal you are most like, I wonder! In Christian circles there is a similar game wondering which character from the Bible you are like. I wonder if you might feel a bit like Hezekiah. He is a man who "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (2 Kings 18:3) and yet who was fallible. In 37:1 he acted in repentance because he hadn't been trusting God in the light of the Assyrian threat. Then in 37:14 he acts in faith. In 38:2 he speaks to God of that faith, "Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." (Isaiah 38:2). However, just a short while later he proudly paraded all the wealth of Judah before the Babylonians thus sealing Judah's fate. Do you identify with that, a fluctuating kind of faith?

I say this because so often when we come to the Bible we are left feeling inadequate. However, we have to keep before us that fact that each of us is a work under construction. In terms of faith we are not the finished article. Hezekiah's faith seems to fluctuate and so will ours and we should not be hard on ourselves if at times when some problem hits us we don't immediately turn to God. However having said all that I have also made the case that we need to learn about faith and so we can look to Hezekiah here and learn about faith

a. faith is expressed in prayer.

Look with me if you would at v14&15, "Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord."

The threat came to Hezekiah in this letter from the Assyrians and Hezekiah went to the Temple where God was and he "spread it out before the Lord". He laid the problem as it were at God's feet and then he prayed. Friends does that not give us a great example of faith and of what to do when problems come our way?

The problem was clear and Hezekiah laid it out before the Lord and then asked the Lord for help in coping with the problem. God in his zeal for his people answered that prayer positively.

Friends I am not saying anything new here and yet we all know that because our faith is not perfect we don't always bring the things that trouble us to God in prayer. We don't always put our confidence in him and we, like Hezekiah earlier, look elsewhere other than God for the means of

sorting out the problems we face. All I am doing here is reminding us all that our confidence is best placed in God and not in our own human efforts.

b. Faith looks to God to act.

That is if we have faith we expect God to hear and answer our prayers. We expect him to act.

I'm sorry if you have heard this story before but I think it fits here.

Some years back I heard a story from a clergyman. He'd been a Vicar in Liverpool and one day a lady came to him and asked "Do parakeets eat celery?" When he asked the reason for her question she told him that while she had been doing her work as a cleaner at the docks that morning she'd seen a shipment of parakeets. However, she'd been told by one of the dockers that, because of a strike that was taking place, they would probably die of malnutrition. She was upset by that and prayed that God would do something. On her way out of the docks she came across a pile of celery that had fallen off a lorry. Was this the answer to her prayer and hence the question, "Do parakeets eat celery?"

There was expectancy a looking for the answer. Does your child or grandchild say can I have an ice cream and then walk away without waiting for an answer?

If we are people of faith then our prayers will not be empty words. They will instead be thought through words as we look for God to respond to what we ask. Yes I understand that God can say no or wait to us but there should still be that expectancy that looking for God to answer.

Helen Roseveare is an English Christian missionary, who worked in the Congo. In one of her books she tells of how when one baby was born with the resultant loss of the mother they found themselves without a hot water bottle to keep it warm at night. The next day she told some of the children at the orphanage of the problem and one 10 year old bluntly prayed that God would send a hot water bottle and also a doll for the baby's 2 year old sister. At that time Helen had been in Africa for four years and had never received a parcel. That afternoon a parcel weighing 22lbs arrived. So she sent for the children to watch the unpacking. They pulled out knitted jerseys, bandages, soap a box of raisins and sultanas and then a hot water bottle scarcely believing it to be true. At that the little 10 year old ran forward saying that if God has sent the hot water bottle he must have sent the doll. She rummaged down to the bottom of the parcel and sure enough pulled out a small well-dressed doll. The parcel had been on its way for five months.

Not all answers to prayer are so dramatic but what I want us to reflect upon is the expectancy of faith which looks to the zeal of the Lord to accomplish things on our behalf.

c. The overriding concern of faith is for God.

Hezekiah's prayer in the end was very simple, "Now O Lord our God deliver us from his hand" (v20) and the reason for that was.... "so that all the kingdoms on earth may know that you alone are God".

The concern expressed in the prayer of Hezekiah was not for himself but for the glory of God.

I really think this is an important lesson for us to take on board because I have a feeling that a lot of my praying and possibly the praying of others is focussed on making life nice for me and those around me but in a sense what Hezekiah was saying here is that ultimately it is not what happens to Judah that is important but the glory of God. Perhaps you like me find that at the end of your prayer you say something like “for Jesus’ sake” which should be the goal of our praying and living.

Our faith and our life of faith is for the glory of God, all we are and all we do. That is why we need to keep our attention on God and not on ourselves.

What we are seeing here is faith is putting our confidence in the power and trustworthiness of the God who rules the nations, expecting him act on our behalf to save and help us to his praise and glory.

I am going now to give us a few moments to put into practice what we have just been thinking about. I am going to encourage us to bring to God in prayer something that is troubling us. We can lay it out before God and then pray about it and ask God to act on our behalf. I would encourage us to pray with expectancy that God will act and over the next days to be looking for his answer. Finally as we pray I hope we will pray that through that situation God’s glory may be seen.