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Things were not looking good for Judah when King Hezekiah came to the throne in Jerusalem in 726 BC (2 Kings 18.1-2). His father, Ahaz, had led Judah deeply into idolatry (2 Kings 16), and by 720 BC the local super-power of Assyria had captured Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, and carried many Israelites off into exile – “because they (the Israelites) obeyed not the voice of the Lord their God, but transgressed his covenant ...” (18.9-12, KJV). Eight years later it was Judah’s turn to be threatened by the Assyrians, now led by Sennacherib (18.13ff).

Any king of Judah had several options when faced with an enemy army at the gates of Jerusalem. He could open the city gates and surrender the people to an unknown fate. He could pay the visitors to go away, by surrendering treasures from the temple, as long as there were any treasures still left in there to give (Hezekiah tried that, (18.14-16), but it did no good). He could try to team up with another strong nation nearby. Or he could “seek the Lord”.

Sennacherib’s three messengers (18.17) were good at their job! They shouted out to the men on the walls of Jerusalem, in Hebrew so that all would understand – (and in rather explicit terms! (vv 26-28)) - that no nation had been able to stand up against Assyria. It therefore made no sense for the people of Jerusalem to pay heed to Hezekiah: their king would not be able to deliver them, and his talk about their need to “trust in the Lord” was clearly nonsense. So a deal was offered – let Judah pay a further large sum to Assyria to go away, then everyone could “eat of his own vine or fig tree, and drink water out of his own cistern” (v 31). There was just one small catch, in verse 32 – “until I (Sennacherib) come and take you away to a land (of plenty) ... that ye may live, and not die”.

How tempting it must have been for Hezekiah to go along with this deal – it preserved a sort of peace and it played for time with the chance that “something might turn up”.

But thanks be to God, he chose to “seek the Lord”. “And it came to pass, when King Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord” (19.1). He sent to Isaiah the prophet (vv 2-5), who was able to give reassurance to the king from the Lord (vv 6-7) – “Be not afraid of their blasphemous words ... I will send a blast upon him ...”: the Lord would ensure that Sennacherib would hear a rumour and return to his own land, where he would die by the sword. (These things duly happened, exactly as the Lord had promised through Isaiah (19.32-37)).

Meanwhile, and sure enough, as Sennacherib departed to fight the king of Ethiopia, he sent a defiant letter to Hezekiah saying basically - “don’t be fooled, I’ll be back” (19.9b-13). Once again, Hezekiah got things right – he “went up into the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord ...” (19.14-19). What an example, to the Lord, to his people, and to us!

We are very aware that the United Kingdom faces critical decisions at this time. Thankfully we do not have a literal enemy at our gates, but our politicians do have to weigh up very carefully how to pick their way through so many conflicting interests

and possible outcomes. As we mentioned in a previous Weekly Reflection, all things being equal, the Prime Minister is surely entitled to receive support in Parliament and the country, but unfortunately the current terms of the proposed “back stop” arrangement, as this country leaves the European Union, still give cause for concern.

Predictable as it may be, we are to continue to follow King Hezekiah’s example, “spreading these things before the Lord”, asking with deep repentance for God’s mercy on our nation at this time, and praying urgently for our Queen and politicians, especially for those who are our fellow Christians.

The grounds for our appeal to the Lord are scripturally well-established: the Lord still has within these shores the metaphorical “seven thousand” who have not bowed their knees before the many Baals of the day, as in I Kings 19.18; He still has the many “righteous” here, as in Genesis 18.16-33, (now by His grace made “righteous in Christ”, Romans 3.22); and He still has those who appeal to Him simply for the sake of His own Name, as in Jeremiah 14.20-21a and I John 2.12.

Praise God, the Lord is the Lord, and is working things through as He sees fit. As He does that, may our prayers before His throne of grace include Habakkuk’s simple plea - “O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years ... in wrath, remember mercy” (from Habakkuk 3.2).

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