1st November 2015

2 Kings 19.14-19

I went to see the latest James Bond film this week. It is the usual predictable fare. Bond fans will not be disappointed. There is the Aston Martin, chases, thrills and spills, leading ladies, nasty villains and 007 taking on the baddies and ultimately winning. As I turn closer to the age of 50 I was encouraged to know that Daniel Craig the actor who plays James Bond is 47 and one of his leading ladies was 52. So it really is a film for middle aged fantasises. And of course these films are pure escapism. The stunts are unbelievable and Bond gets duffed up so many times a normal person would be spending six months in hospital with those injuries, but he just dusts himself down and presses on to victory.

There is always a scene in a Bond film where 007 just walks straight in to the enemy’s lair. Instead of being shot straight away, they treat him like an honoured guest – ‘come this way Mr Bond, we have been expecting you. Have our special room, with all services laid on’. Then a moment later they are torturing him to the point of death. ‘Do you expect me to talk Goldfinger? No I expect you to die Mr Bond!’ Why didn’t they just shoot him the moment he walked in?

The topic today is God protects. It is a difficult topic because life is difficult. Some of us have known the protection of God; some of us have suffered tragedies. In this life, unlike in the world of James Bond, the goodies don’t always win and the leading ladies are not always protected and share a bottle of champagne with their hero, and more, at the end of the film.

The passage we have to look at is from the Second Book of Kings. These are the historical books of the Old Testament, tracing the exploits of the Kings of Israel up to 500 years before the time of Jesus. If you recall previous sermons months ago, the institution of King was something God didn’t want for His people because He knew that power can corrupt and exploit others and Kings would do that. But the people of Israel wanted to be like the surrounding nations and have a king to rule over them so God let them have their way. The story of kings turns out as God predicts. Most of the Kings are corrupt and misrule the people and pay scant attention to being faithful to God’s ways. There are some exceptions including the King we consider today: King Hezekiah.

King Hezekiah is described as someone whose great uprightness compares with David’s: although David was actually a somewhat ambiguous character himself. The people who read the bible are divided between those who find it helpful to have stories of great heroes who can be an inspiration to them and flawed heroes who can be an encouragement, and the bible meets both needs in the way it describes its heroes. James Bond meanwhile only has slight character flaws – he is loyal to Queen and country even if he still finds it hard to settle down with one girl.

Hezekiah is loyal to God and makes radical commitments at the start of his reign to purge his kingdom of pagan worship and practices that do not honour the God of Israel. He is also successful in military and political affairs especially against the Philistines and in standing up against Assyrian aggression.

But Assyria – the superpower of the day now threatens retaliation from the north. Sennacherib the Assyrian ruler invades the northern kingdom of Israel and conquers it and surrounds Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah, where King Hezekiah has his base.

This act of aggression triggers a huge spiritual, religious and political struggle that will put Hezekiah under pressure to test his mettle as a leader and whether he will be regarded as a hero.

In chapter 18 verse 5 he was regarded as someone who trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. In verse 22 it is said ‘we are relying on the Lord our God’. Will they keep faith in this time of adversity when the army of the superpower is camped outside their city?

Sennacherib taunts Hezekiah in chapter 18. It would be wise to surrender now he said. We can make good terms.

It has echoes of Neville Chamberlain appeasing Hitler –‘peace in our time’ – let’s give the Nazis Czechoslovakia and then they will stop being aggressive. Meanwhile Winston Churchill sees through this and recognises the Nazis for who they are. Replacing Chamberlain after the outbreak of the War it will be Churchill who doggedly prevents Britain from making a settlement with fascists. ‘We will never surrender’ was the rallying cry. Hezekiah is faced with his Churchill moment.

Sennacherib’s lieutenants ask Hezekiah’s men ‘what are you relying on? The Egyptians – they can’t be relied on to help you. ‘Can you rely on God?’ is their next taunt. Even if God wanted to rescue Judah from Sennacherib, would he be able to do so? Have the gods of any other nations rescued them from the might of Assyria?

 Sennacherib doesn’t actually believe that God is active in the world in a way that could affect him. At least he doesn’t believe this about the God of Israel.

Hezekiah’s men return to their king in horror at Sennacherib’s blasphemy. But in reality the blasphemy is good news. Surely the God of Israel cannot resist the temptation to put Sennacherib in his place?

It’s like getting a difficult letter, an offensive and aggressive letter and you stand in the middle of your office and wave it around and say ‘look at this!’ By chapter 19 that is what King Hezekiah is metaphorically doing. It is not just that the Assyrians have surrounded Jerusalem and threaten to destroy it that devastates Hezekiah. He also points out to the Almighty the Assyrian King’s slighting of God.

When someone blasphemes God and you are in the vicinity, it is almost as if you need to be wary of getting caught up in the crossfire or in the fallout of the explosion that may follow. You will be wise to make sure and to make clear that you disassociate yourself from the blasphemy.

In addition to going into the temple to stand before God, Hezekiah sends his staff to discover the prophet Isaiah’s reaction to what has happened. Isaiah says that God has nothing to fear of them and that therefore Israel has nothing to fear from them. The point is implied right at the beginning of Isaiah pronouncement. Whereas the Assyrian kings’ messengers announce ‘the Great king, the King of Assyria, has said this…’ which was the standard way an aide would introduce his king’s message, Isaiah starts his announcement by saying ‘thus says the Lord…’This Lord and King is much more impressive than the self-styled ‘great King ‘ of Assyria.

God is in a position to get the so-called Great King simply to go home. God’s declaration could be fulfilled by the king’s hearing a true report of trouble back home or by his hearing a false rumour along these lines; the spirit could thus be a spirit of deception or one of appropriate fear or irrational fear.

Often you don’t know what the fulfilment of a prophecy will look like until it happens. What actually happens is that he hears a true report of trouble arriving from the south and then later returns home and gets assassinated. Archaeological evidence backs up this story.

 It is the results of that army from the Egyptians advancing from the south that must have seem to Hezekiah like the cavalry had arrived. Or in a James Bond movie – just when he was facing defeat in come the British troops to even up the odds. There is of course irony here because the Assyrians had mocked Hezekiah about relying on the Egyptians and it is from Egypt that their saviour came. Or rather the eye of faith would say that God used them to relieve Jerusalem from the Assyrian pressure. Once again it shows how prophecy isn’t designed to be a kind of literal forecast of how events will turn out. Usually the way prophecy is fulfilled is quite a surprise. Those with faith in God will see God’s hand in those events.

The darkest moment for Britain in the Second World War was arguably the evacuation of Dunkirk. British Troops trapped on the beaches of northern France needed a rescue. Their grave plight led King George VI to call for an unprecedented week of prayer. Throughout the country, people prayed on 26 May for a miraculous delivery. Over 300,000 were rescued in what Churchill called a miracle of deliverance.

It’s hard to imagine present day Britain, were religion and faith is increasingly seen as an embarrassment or a delusion, turning to prayer in the same way. Yet there was a palpable sense of God’s deliverance at the time. Dunkirk was like a modern day exodus with the water separating the righteous from their foes. The British before the war may have been more slave owners than slaves but after the subsequent battle through the heat of conquest a new unity was forged. The decency, courage, humour and allegiance to democratic rights that many today see as fundamental to being British were tempered in the fires of the Blitz and fought for on the western front.

Moreover, as with the story of Israel and the exodus, deliverance from the enemy was followed not by immediate peace but by severe post war austerity and a generation that then became intoxicated on liberty and in danger of forgetting what it had been saved for. On Remembrance Sunday we rightly remember those who gave their lives for our freedom. But we need also to remember the God who was behind our deliverance.

It’s the Assyrian king’s reaction to this event that generates the letter Hezekiah took into the temple so as to wave it before God and say: ‘have a look at this! ‘It is a great model for prayer. So is the way Hezekiah actually addresses God, reaffirming the truths about God being the Lord of all the world (including the Assyrian empire), (verse 15: “Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth)

Urging God to look and listen and deliver, (verse 16: Give ear, Lord, and hear; open your eyes, Lord, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.)

Leaving to God exactly what to do, (verse 19: Now, Lord our God, deliver us from his hand)

And closing with the reminder that delivering Judah from Assyria could contribute to the whole world’s acknowledging the God of Israel as the true God of all (verse 19: so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, Lord, are God.”)

We will have heard many people mock us and our faith: how can you believe in God when science has disproved Him?; how can you believe in God when there is so much suffering?; it’s all a crutch – you need to toughen up and live in the real world. Events, such as hardship, suffering and tragedy can encircle us like the Assyrian army, threatening our faith and asking the question – can you really rely on God, can you really trust in God.

It will lead to much heart searching and a test of faith. Just as Hezekiah had. He took his doubts and concerns to God in prayer, calling on God’s honour and reputation to be defended.

Last week on the Gower retreat we had one session on the calming of the storm and I talked about fear. One fear of course is illness and suffering. I read about a university lecturer who was diagnosed as having cancer in the pancreas and was told, incorrectly as it turned out, that she would die soon.

‘*When I was told I was about to die, I thought, ‘Right. This is it. What do I pray for? Life? But why should God intervene in the laws of nature just to save me? Lots of far better, more important people than I will die – like the mothers and fathers of small children. Anyway dying’s not the worst thing that can happen. I went on this way for a while, still acting the competent, in command person I had always been until I realised how laughable it was.*

*At that point I decided that it was all too complicated for me. So, as I lay there, I gathered up all the complications like a tangled skein of wool and very vividly in my mind, lifted them up and deposited the lot in Go’s lap, saying: ‘look I can’t handle this. You do what you think is best and that‘ll be fine by me. My only prayer is, do not abandon me to chance. I don’t care what happens to me as long as it’s what you decide.’*

*And so I relaxed completely and surrendered myself to God. Fleeting images of a small boat, launching out into an enormous ocean without sails or oars came to me and I accepted them…. After this I felt totally at peace and safe. Nothing could harm me…. When I was sent home to die, that summer was the happiest of my life.*

God will have the last word, our faith suggests. Unlike James Bond, there is no guarantee that the victory will be in this life, although amazing things do happen and prayers for miracles sometimes are answered. Even so God will have the ultimate victory.

If you come along to my talk on Romans on Thursday we will consider the Christian hope in a world of suffering and decay and injustice and how like Hezekiah we groan in prayer towards God to redeem and make right his creation. But it is a Christian belief that creation has gone wrong, there is darkness and evil within it. We are involved in a struggle, in a battle. There are casualties. Next Sunday we will remember those who gave their lives in war: the ultimate sacrifice. Yet Christians today are dying for their faith, witnessing to a greater victory of love over hatred and goodness over evil.

The church holds a faith that is always living in light of the ultimate victory of Christ over evil. He is the source of our hope and the ground of our optimism. As the Christian minster and civil rights champion, Martin Luther King Jr. put it, "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Let us remember that at this time of remembrance.

Questions:

1. How is James Bond like/unlike God/Jesus!
2. Have you any testimonies of the protection of God?
3. How have you responded to people mocking or slighting your faith?
4. Discuss Hezekiah’s prayer. Is it a good prayer? Would you pray it?
5. Discuss the prayer of the university lecturer coping with pancreatic cancer. What you pray in those circumstances?
6. What does it mean to call God ‘our Rock and fortress’ (Psalm 18.2).