**8th November 2015**

**2 Kings 20.1-11**

I was buying some fireworks this week for Bonfire Night and I was laughing with my fellow customers at the ridiculous names they give to them. We could choose between Armageddon and the End of the word. Between Doom and Destruction, or Annihilation. One firework was called Sex bomb: my instincts told me that one in particular was bound to disappoint. You could also buy A Bomb and Radiation. All of which seemed in bad taste, positioned as Bonfire Night is, so close to Remembrance Sunday.

I knew one old lady who was a young woman during the Blitz in London. She would often have panic attacks on the 5th November as the sounds of fireworks going off all around her would revive the trauma of the 1940s wartime London, where every night was a fight to survive.

Whether its Ukraine or Syria or Gaza, bombs are still dropping on people and conflicts are still happening. Our government is still agonizing over whether to bomb Islamic State fighters in Syria. Michael Fallon the Defence Minister has said it is morally indefensible not to bomb IS, as they are a direct threat to us in Britain: “After 30 British holiday makers were slaughtered on a beach in Tunisia, it’s not morally right to rely on French or Australian or American aircraft to keep our streets safe’, he said. Even the Vicar of Baghdad, Andrew White, has called for the evil of IS to be destroyed.

The reality of war is being washed up on the shores of Greece and Cyprus and pressing in on the border fences of Hungary and Serbia and trying to find a home somewhere in Europe. The world has always been a mess and it still is. Lest we forget.

On this Remembrance Sunday we remember all this. We open our eyes once again to the mess we are in and take off the blinkers that pretends we live in a civilised, caring generous compassionate society and the world is getting better. We are still in a mess.

And in the middle of that mess, men and women are called to do their duty and fight for their country or a particular cause, however compromised. And today we remember their sacrifice, their courage, their bravery, whilst also not being blinkered at the ambiguity of their motives and the moral compromises they may have to make. War is messy.

I talked last week about the latest James Bond film, which is the must-see movie of the moment. I said last week that like all Bond movies it is pure escapism with the usual combination of thrills, spills, chases, girls, cars and baddies. 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.

As we observe Remembrance Sunday this weekend we have to deal with reality. Soldiers get injured and killed doing their duty. There is a cost to war and scars that never heal. The reality of warfare and fighting is a long way from the glamorised version of 007. Lest we forget.

However there are connections between James Bond and our armed forces. Ian Fleming the creator of 007 was a Personal Assistant to the Director of Naval Intelligence during World War II and was introduced to real secret agents. These brave but little known men and women provided him with the basic ideas for the character.

One of those characters was ‘Q’ the genius with gadgets. During the War Fleming met Charles Fraser Smith from the Ministry of Supply. Fraser Smith made many real life gadgets and secret devices to help secret agents and POWs. When Fleming met him he was making a box of Dunlop golf balls to be sent to British Prisoners of War camps in places such as Colditz. Some of the golf balls contained secret messages and maps and tiny compasses to help escape attempts. When Fleming wrote Diamonds are Forever there is a scene where golf balls are cut open to reveal priceless diamonds. The similarities between Q and Charles Fraser Smith are very clear.

What is fascinating about Fraser Smith is that he had a strong personal Christian faith which gave direction, purpose and guidance for his decisions. He had found faith through a Beach Mission. There he said he gave up ‘religion’ where he tried to earn God’s forgiveness by being outwardly good. In place of this he committed his life to Christ and noticed a dramatic change in his nature resulting in a sincere grief for sin and an experience of the love of God and a personal faith in Jesus who had died and rose again for him.

He became committed to a local church and their youth ministry and then expressed an interest in missionary work in Morocco. He learnt fluent French and went out to Morocco in 1926 supporting himself in farming and trading. He proved himself to be resourceful and enterprising and was an early convert to organic principles in farming. He eventually delegated his farming management to others and opened an orphanage in Marrakesh. He did nothing but good in Morocco although as usual in Muslim lands, lasting converts to the Christian faith were few. His orphanage is still being run today by Save the Children.

By 1940 war had broken out and he was forced to return to the UK. One Sunday he attended a church to describe his missionary work in Morocco. Among those in attendance was Sir George Oliver, Director General of the Ministry of Supply who was impressed at Charles Fraser Smith and offered him a ‘funny sort of job’. ‘Signing the official secrets act he would be supplying our forces with ‘various requirements’. The rest is history as they say.

Charles found Ian Fleming charming and persuasive, not unlike the character of Bond in some ways. However he was not happy with Fleming’s attitude to women as displayed in Bond’s antics, but he was generous in his praise towards him. He said ‘Fleming was the type we needed to win the Second World War. Thankfully, that war brought in all kinds of geniuses’. And he is true – there is something about human nature that when faced with adversity and challenge some people rise to it and respond creatively and ambitiously.

Fraser Smith wrote this about his Christian view of war: ‘Only fools and barbarians glorify war. Fighting an aggressor is a sad and uncomfortable task… but it has to be done when there is no alternative.’ It was the comment of a Christian man who found himself plunged into the murky world of tricks and deception. Everything he did in the struggle with Hitler’s Nazis was done as a Christian. Even small decisions were the result of prayer. His personal relationship with God governed all his actions as he fought his secret war.

The Official Secrets Act imposed a thirty year silence on him. But in the late 1970s his work came to public attention and he became a minor celebrity and had opportunity to share about his work and also his faith. He died at the age of 88 in 1992. One comment he had written about death was read at his funeral: ‘I always think of death not as a sunset, an ending, but as a sunrise, a beginning … death for the true follower of Christ is entrance to real life. This starts at the ‘death of the cross’… it is the greatest event in life, the climax of life… the entrance into something magnificent. It is the beginning of true and perfect living. We can say with Paul, ‘for me to live is Christ, but to die is gain.’ In this way ‘death is swallowed up in victory’. [[1]](#endnote-1)The words of Charles Fraser Smith – the original Q

Our bible passage today is the end of the life of King Hezekiah. Hezekiah has an illness that threatens his life. The story doesn’t say that it was a punishment for his sin. Indeed if you remember from last week the way his story has been told so far Hezekiah has been made out to be something of a hero.

Just to recap last week: the superpower of the day, Assyria had encircled Jerusalem where Hezekiah had his palace and was threatening to invade and destroy the city. They suggested to Hezekiah that he surrender. The Assyrians suggested that Hezekiah’s God would not protect him and was impotent against the might of the Assyrian army. Hezekiah had his Churchill moment where he declared he would not surrender but trust God’s deliverance. All of which turned out to be true. The Assyrians were attacked by the Egyptians and turned tail and the Assyrian King Sennacherib was assassinated. I suggested, like the miracle of Dunkirk,those with faith can read history and see God’s hand of deliverance at work. Hezekiah came out of the story a hero, a man of faith.

Now he gets an illness that threatens to kill him. You could say it’s just one of those things and in the society he lived in he couldn’t complain because many people died of illness that today we can treat. But he can appeal to his life of commitment to God and in appealing for God to heal him it looks as if this is something God takes into account in answering his prayer, though it is explicitly the tears that move God. Verse 3: *“Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.*

Of course, many committed people do not have that kind of experience. The later story of Hezekiah’s great grandson, Josiah, will illustrate the point. Many shed tears on remembrance Sunday for grief and loss that they didn’t ask for and certainly prayed would never happen to them. Here, too, God’s relationship with us is not predictable.

John Goldingay, an Old Testament scholar, commenting on this passage [[2]](#endnote-2)wrote how his wife Ann had multiple sclerosis for forty two years until she died a few years ago. He writes that ‘*we and other people prayed for her healing on lots of occasions in many ways, supported by a number of high profile figures in the world of praying for healing. She never got healed. Yet it was not the case that God simply ignored our prayers. God gave her a ministry that she exercised through her having to live with increasing disability, and God made a man out of me through me having to live with it. Sometimes people say that prayer is designed to change us, not to change God, and that’s a very dangerous half-truth. Prayer is designed to change God, but prayer is part of a relationship, and you can’t predict ahead of time how the interactions in a relationship will work out’.*

Hezekiah proved that prayer can change God. It’s typical that a prophet such as Isaiah tells you what is going to happen as if it’s fixed, ( see verse 1: *This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.”* ). But the way stories unfold indicate that it’s not fixed at all. That can be bad news. When God wants to do something good for you but you don’t respond with trust and commitment, that response may change God’s mind (it may not – in this respect, too, relationships with God, like any relationships, are not predictable). The good news is that when God tells you that things are going to turn out badly for you, your response may change God’s mind. Hezekiah’s story shows that when bad things threaten us, it may not relate to what we deserve. And in prayer before God things can change.

This doesn’t mean it’s random; God may be taking into account things other than your needs and longings. It does mean that it’s always worth behaving like a child in relation to its parent and refusing very easily to take no for an answer. When Jesus says we must become like a child to enter the kingdom of God, perhaps an aspect of that is that we shouldn’t be afraid of asking questions in childlike innocence and trust even if, sometimes to the parent, we can come across as annoying.

This story is also notable for the way that Isaiah combines bringing a word from God with using traditional medicine. Verse 4-6: 4 *Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: 5 “Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the Lord. 6 I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria*

Like washing in the Jordan when you have a skin ailment, (think of the story of Elisha and Naaman the leper), the treatment in question would hardly be effective in countering a potential fatal illness, but God seems to like using physical means in a sacramental way. In a moment we will eat bread and drink wine as a sacrament of the life Jesus brings to us. May that be a healing and strengthening sacrament.

If Hezekiah was ill he would not have been able to go to the temple - : so a speedy freedom to do so would be a significant one. That might explain his focus for asking for a sign. The nature of the sign is unclear but it seems to imply shifting shadows. Sometimes we all need signs to reassure us we are going in the right direction and that God is with us.

Hezekiah is a more ambiguous person than is implied by some of the statements about him. Later in this chapter an embassy from Babylonia comes to make an alliance with Hezekiah against Assyria. Assyria may now be a waning superpower so you could say Hezekiah is being a shrewd politician and guesses the way the wind is blowing. Isaiah with prophetic insight brings a word from the Lord to say that Babylon will rise up and replace the Assyrians as the superpower. Once they become a superpower their relationship to Hezekiah’s kingdom of Judah will change dramatically. They will come and destroy Judah as a nation and send her people into exile.

Hezekiah’s response could be read as cynical: *19 “The word of the Lord you have spoken is good,” Hezekiah replied. For he thought, “Will there not be peace and security in my lifetime?”* Is all he is concerned about is seeing out his own life in comfort and peace and not too worried about the future because He won’t be there?

The choices and actions we make now, determine the future. The bravery and sacrifice of those in the past have secured our freedom for now, but what of the future? Like Charles Fraser Smith, as Christians we are caught up in, at times, a sad and uncomfortable world. There is no alternative but to play our part in this mess; to pray and work for God’s healing and liberation and a better future; to plead with tears like Hezekiah, for our plight; to listen for the word of the Lord to direct our paths. Lest we forget our true deliverer.

1. Charles Fraser Smith life story taken from Don Stephens ‘War ad Grace’ EP books 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. J Goldingay, 1and 2 Kings for Everyone, SPCK , 2011

   Questions:

   Discuss Christians’ attitude to war. Does the remarks of Charles Fraser Smith correspond to your attitude to war.

   The other reading on this Sunday was Romans 12.9-21. What does that say about how Christian’s should view war and conflict?

   Look at Hezekiah’s prayer for his own life. Is it fair to argue with God and make your case? Do tears matter?

   Are you troubled at the concept of God ‘changing His mind?’ Would you agree that our relationship with God is unpredictable?

   What things in life are ‘sacramental’ to you?

   Where do you think society is ‘short termism’ and not making preparations for the future? What about the church? [↑](#endnote-ref-2)