

SERMON ~ BIBLE READING: 2 KINGS 18, 19

We've already seen the kind of threat that Sennacherib threw down to Hezekiah – remember, Sennacherib was known as “the flame that consumes those who will not submit” and commanded the Assyrian Empire with a ruthless and terrorising army. They were the “superpower” of the day and tortured and obliterated the nations they attacked. And we've thought about the demoralising and undermining nature of that threat – remember, Hezekiah's representatives had ripped their robes in despair after listening to Sennacherib's chief of staff. So what did Sennacherib's envoys say to cause such panic and despair?

SENNACHERIB'S ENVOYS SOW CONFUSION

The Assyrians sow both spiritual and moral confusion:

- they charge Hezekiah with wrong-doing in destroying God's shrines and in telling the people to worship only at the altar in Jerusalem;
- they claim to speak for God, asserting that the LORD himself has told them to attack and destroy their country;
- they turn right and wrong upside down;
- they attack the nature of God, implying that the Lord is only like any other god who falls before Sennacherib.

This is good psychology – to make the enemy believe they cannot win, right from the outset.

To challenge the taunts of bullies like these – and there are plenty around in today's world – let us

pray to the Father, asking boldly, believingly, without a second thought, for his help – for he loves to give us help generously and graciously, help that will reinforce our faith;

look straight ahead with honest confidence, planning carefully, avoiding evil, looking neither right nor left, never going one step off the right way and never hanging our head in shame – in short, depending on God's grace, let us be single-minded.

THE ENVOYS' PERSONAL ATTACK

If sowing spiritual and moral confusion isn't bad enough, they now mount a smear campaign and launch a public attack – they target the Hebrew leaders and the Kingdom of Judah's friends, such as Egypt, which was notoriously fickle – they allege Hezekiah's personal incompetence. All of which is a reminder that a godly life is no guarantee at all against

danger.

HEZEKIAH'S GODLY RESPONSE

Although Hezekiah's response to Sennacherib is mixed – at first he tries to appease Sennacherib, seeking compromise with Assyria and offering tribute payment, even using assets devoted to the temple – but generally he opposes and destroys evil. As a Bible writer puts it, 'he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done...'; 'Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel...', being highly commended for what he did do right.

Three final points:

Just as God acts in response to Hezekiah's prayers and wise actions, so he acts today when we pray and when we seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with him.

Hezekiah's life leaves us with a challenge. He may not always have been wholehearted enough for God, but how wholehearted for God are we? He may not have consistently done the right thing, but how consistently do we do the right thing?

God will wipe out the insults hurled at him and his chosen people today, scattering the bluffing braggarts, knocking tyrants off their high horses and leaving the cruel and callous out in the cold. And just as he granted Judah protection from the evil that threatened to overwhelm them, so he will deliver us from the seemingly pervasive evil of today's world. Let us trust the Lord of history.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Oliver Cromwell is reputed to have said 'Put your faith in God and keep your powder dry.'

GOING DEEPER

Questions on the Bible passages, 2 Kings 18 and 19, and on the sermon for you to think about, either on your own or in a small group:

1. What are the appropriate limits of fear? To what extent should Hezekiah and the people have abandoned their fears in favour of trusting God?
2. What is the relationship between prayer and God's action in this story and elsewhere in the Bible?
3. What can this story mean for Christians who have not experienced God's protection – such as Christians in Rwanda?