**Sunday 4th July 2021**

2 Chronicles 34: 1-7, 14-22, 26-28

Josiah

We continue in the series on the kings of Israel and Judah. Last week we were focused on Asa, quite an early king in the list, but now we skip forward again to Josiah – another king of Judah. At the time Josiah took the throne Israel had been overcome by Assyria and people had been deported.

Josiah’s father had been Amon, one of the kings who began evil and remained so all through his reign. Josiah took the throne when he was 8 years old. We are told that in the eighth year of his reign – so 16 years – he began to seek the God of David. In his twelfth year – so 20 years old – he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of all the high places.

We know that he was not the first king to carry out this type of cleansing from the altars and shrines used for the worship of other gods – we heard just last week that Asa had done that. In this aspect Josiah was just another king who accepted Yahweh as the one true God and tried to please him in the way that he understood.

Some of the details provided show his fervour to not only remove and destroy these places of worship, but to defile them so could not be used for their purpose. For example, where Asherah poles were burned and ground to powder and scattered over the graves of ordinary people, it was not to desecrate the graves, but to defile the goddess by removing her status – thrown among the common people. Again, placing burned human bones on the altar defiled them so could not be used again.

It was during this purge and trying to re-decorate the temple, so it was pleasing to God that the Book of the Law was found. When Josiah heard the law that had been decreed by God, to Moses, he had the full realization of why God was so angry with the nation.

It was obvious to Josiah that the nation had turned from God, with the amount of shrines, stones, altars, high places, Asherah poles and such like that were all around. Even altars built for them in the temple in Jerusalem. But the book revealed the full extent that the nation had detracted from God’s laws. The last time that Israel and Judah had adhere to the laws were in the reign of David. It also reveals to us how much the word of the Lord had disappeared from the Israelites’ day to day living. They were using the compass of what other people were telling them, rather than reading what had been recorded.

It is uncertain what exactly was contained in the book of the law, but it could either have been the whole of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the bible, or else only some, but definitely Deuteronomy, as it contained all the laws that God had spoken to Israel, through Moses, including the warning of exile.

Rather than Josiah resting in the knowledge that he was already beginning to purge the nation and doing what he could, his response to hearing the truth with how far removed the nation had become from God’s law was to tear his clothes and to enquire of the Lord in these times.

The words that God spoke through the prophetess, Huldah, were not soothing or comfortable. God’s response was to say that He would not revoke His plans, His judgement. There would remain consequences for how far the previous kings had led the people away from God. However, God would show mercy to Josiah, because he had humbled himself – he put God before his own desires, power and status - by delaying the inevitable. Josiah was promised peace in his time and that the coming disaster would not happen in his lifetime.

So what did Josiah decide to do, while living under the cloud of coming judgement? I cannot help but think of Dad’s Army and Frazer saying “we’re all doomed!”. How do we react when it becomes obvious that the worst scenario imagined will become reality?

Do we give up trying to change things? Do we have the attitude of “what’s the point”? Do we just then wait for the inevitable?

Josiah did none of that. He went to the temple and, in the presence of all the elders, the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the Levites – all the people from the least to the greatest and read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord. Josiah committed to change the nation so that God’s law would be honoured and followed once again.

Josiah “loved the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the law of Moses”.

Josiah obeyed God neither for the sake of rewards – there was not political trouble from other nations at that time, so he was not seeking protection in times of war – nor for aversion of judgement – he had been told clearly that could not be averted. Josiah obeyed God simply because that is what his love and faith in God brought about. His actions were done purely for the sake of Yahweh (God).

Consider for a moment, hundreds of years later, Josiah’s earthly descendant, Jesus before He was arrested prayed “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will”. Again, if Frazer had been there, another “we’re doomed” moment. But prayer, obedience and trust in God’s plans was the response of Jesus.

Even in the darkest times, we can shine the light of Christ simply by our actions borne from our love for Him.

At the age of 26, Josiah called the people of Judah, and those who had settled there from Israel, to observe the Passover – a communal celebration. Remember that Josiah had come to the throne at 8 years old, began to follow God from the age of 16 – so these events covered many years. Like Mike had said last week – let us not just start well but finish well too. Josiah continued to seek God and His desires all the way through his life.

Although the Passover had continued to be observed, it had again become sloppy in relation to how God had commanded it to be celebrated. It had not been carried out according to God’s commands since Samuel led Israel. The priests and Levites were properly consecrated and only the Levites were allowed to control the offerings in the way commanded.

When Josiah commanded for the Passover to be observed, he was again humbling himself. This act was showing that monarchy is not essential for the covenant relationship and God’s acts of deliverance to continue. The Passover celebrated how God had released the Israelites from slavery, just because He loved each of them. There was no king at that time, it was the cries of the ordinary people that He had heard, with no mediator. Josiah was acknowledging that he was not greater than God, simply his servant.

Josiah led by example. Although this is not explicit in the narrative in the books of kings or chronicles, we see this when Jeremiah addresses Josiah’s son Jehoahaz (chapter 22: 15-16) ““Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the Lord”.

From this snippet it appears that Josiah was whole-hearted. He did not try to make the temple any more sumptuous than commanded, he did not strive to gain wealth, but defended the poor and needy. As I keep saying, the whole purpose of God’s laws was to promote a community where there was justice and fairness for all.

Let us just stop now and consider things not mentioned in the bible narrative. Have you given much thought to the upheaval caused in the purge? Habits that can be damaging are still hard to give up. With the temple now only being in Jerusalem, key religious personnel would have been left unemployed, as did not want to move to Jerusalem. What would the financial impact have been on them, or employment prospects? For the people access to religious practices that they had become used to, where they found comfort and security would have been removed. How would we feel if we were told that we could not worship in this church?

Even when God’s word must be obeyed, it does not mean that it is an easy journey. There is often turmoil – difficult decisions to make.

Josiah’s desire was to encourage whole-hearted commitment to God. Although actions may be governed by law, the heart cannot be. Consider the laws we live under. It is illegal to murder, but still we hear of people who have done so. Discrimination and racism – there are laws to combat these too, but still we hear of it happening. All kinds of suffering are on the whole results of hatred and greed. We can have laws to govern our actions, but it does not bring about a change of heart. It is the same for our Spiritual and Godly behaviour too.

Matthew 7: 21-23 “Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles”. Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”.

This is a tough passage. As Mike said last week, when we enter heaven who will we be surprised to see, and who will we be surprised by their absence? Many people will say the right thing, use lovely words, lift us and encourage us. But we do not see into their heart. We cannot judge anyone, either for wrongdoing, or for righteous deeds. God will act for the good of His children, His creation – but we can put too much emphasis on what we see outwardly. Although Josiah was trying to change things for the good, to implement the laws of God, some of the people would have simply been following them to the letter and not from the heart.

Josiah called the people to follow God. He was not left alone in this. God was using His prophets too. Jeremiah was prophesying at the time, together with Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Ezekiel. Giving warning of what God would bring about.

If we gather from this that God is just revelling in explaining to people what His punishment will be, then we have an incorrect perspective of the heart of God.

Although we have heard that God’s judgement is inevitable let us remember the words in 2 Peter 3 verse 9. “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

God is our Father and above all else a Father loves His children. God as our Father has given us freewill, which means that He has had to open Himself up to all the consequences of children who have chosen to live away from His permanent protection. He has to watch His children as they each come to the decision whether to accept His fathership or not. All Father’s in their role have to become judge at times to ensure fairness. God delights in showing His love to those who accept Him, but for those who do not accept Him and live a life that may be damaging to others, He is forced to act in a way that will bring about His goodness, a fair and just society. Often these seem harsh to our way of thinking, but God does NOT delight in punishment, but delights in extending His grace, mercy and love whenever we allow Him to. God always provides warnings, such as the prophets, together with time for us to repent and turn back to Him.

I would urge you to continually examine your heart and relationship with God: Are you following Him whole-heartedly? Are there any idols that you have unwittingly placed above Him? Are there steps that you need to follow to show your heart of love for Christ, so that you can shine His light into someone’s darkness? Especially in the light of the pandemic are we subconsciously living in the belief that “we are all doomed”?

We cannot rely on anyone else to ensure our own Spiritual wellbeing. There will be people who God places on our path to give us aid, encouragement, correction, teaching and refreshment – but that should not replace His word. As we were reminded last week, no-one else will be there to give account of our actions before God, with Christ. Take time to examine your own heart – and remember, we are not “all doomed!”.