Revival

Two weeks ago, I was at a friend's eightieth birthday party, and I was talking to a fellow named Vincent. He asked what my job was, and I told him about being a pastor. "What church is that?" he asked. "The Uniting Church" I answered. "Is that a protestant church?" he asked. Vincent is from Brazil – his only experience of church is the Roman Catholic Church. I explained how it was the union of three different protestant churches.

He said he liked that it was called 'uniting' rather than 'united', because it meant it was an ongoing thing. And then he asked the question that often goes unasked: "Has it been a success?"

We heard in our Old Testament reading about King Hezekiah, who reigned over Judah from the capital Jerusalem. Hezekiah's father was Ahaz – and Ahaz was not a good king. He was not a good man. Under King Ahaz, the kingdom had suffered, and when he died the kingdom was not in a good way.

Young Hezekiah had seen what his father had been like, and seen his country decline under his reign. When Hezekiah assumed the throne of Judah at age 25 he was determined to bring the people back to God. Throughout his reign, he led the people to turn back to God - to truly be God's people in the world.

The people responded to Hezekiah's call, and to Hezekiah's leadership, and they turned to back to God and revival ensued.

Just as Jesus would later call his followers to preach the gospel to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, Hezekiah was passionate to extend revival that began in Jerusalem to far beyond. He sent word from border to border about what God was doing. He did it, as we heard at the beginning of the reading from 2 Chronicles, by letter. – "Hezekiah sent word to all Israel and Judah and also wrote letters to Ephraim and Manasseh".

The letters were special. Verse 6 tells us that at the king's command, couriers went throughout Israel and Judah with letters from the king and from his officials… The letters weren't just bulk mailed circulars – this was the 700ish BC equivalent of priority mail. Those that carried the letters had an important job to do – I like to think that the unofficial US postal service motto would have applied "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

Our mission today to share the good news of Jesus is like that of the couriers of Hezekiah's time. We have a message to deliver to the world around us. Although the volume of letters in the mail has declined in recent years, so many more letters or communications arrive by email and text - and I wonder how many of them lay unread in inboxes. And how many of the form letters and brochures and flyers that arrive in our letter boxes are tossed straight in the bin. And how many phone calls are not returned.

Hezekiah's couriers – the royal mail if you like – made sure that the intended recipients received the letters. And I don't think many people would toss a letter from the king in the bin.

Hezekiah's letter invited the people to come to the temple in Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover. Formal celebration of the Passover as a nation hadn't happened in quite some time – possibly since the time of Joshua (Joshua 5:10-11), or the Judges (2 Kings 23:22), or even

recently as the time of Solomon (2 Chronicles 30:26). But whichever date it had last happened, it was clearly a long time ago.

The Passover should have been observed in the first moon period of the year, but this hadn't been possible because not enough priests had consecrated themselves. That was the point of being a priest – to do your priestly duties at the temple, and to prepare yourself ritually to do those duties. That's how bad things had become under King Ahaz! The king didn't bother, the priests didn't bother – was it any wonder no one bothered? Love and devotion to the God who had saved them from slavery in Egypt, led them through the wilderness to the promised land, raised up judges and prophets and kings for them, had all but gone.

But now that Hezekiah was on the throne, things would change. But change is often difficult and seldom as fast as we'd like, and there hadn't been enough time to celebrate Passover at the right time. The new king thought it was important, though, so he called together the leaders of Judah to see what could be done - and they had concluded that the best thing to do was delay the celebration of Passover by a month, so that everything could be put in place.

In fact, there was provision in the law for such a delay (Numbers 9.9-12), for those who were unclean at the proper time of the Passover, or were on a long journey. They could observe the Passover in the second month instead. In that first year of Hezekiah's rule, the priests themselves had clearly been ritually unclean in the first month, and many people could not or had not gathered at Jerusalem, so it was accepted by the king and his officials as sufficient grounds to delay the celebration - it may have been a pragmatic decision to delay Passover by a month – but is was a way of restoring the remembrance of Passover happened as soon as possible.

And so, with that background, verse 6 tells us "At the king's command, couriers went throughout Israel and Judah with letters from the king and from his officials."

Then we have the text of the letter which began, "People of Israel, return to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that he may return to you who are left, who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria."

It might seem odd to hear "Return to God, so that he may return to you" – because it is our experience that God reaches out to us in Jesus, even though we have turned away from him. But the ancient people had cut themselves of from God – they'd turned away from God, and had worshipped Idols. So Hezekiah, in this letter, reminded the people of who God is: the Lord – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel – the God who had made them a nation. God who made promises to their ancestors – that God would be their God, and the people would be God's people.

From this urging to return to the God, Hezekiah's letter moves to a warning: Do not be like your parents and your fellow Israelites, who were unfaithful to the Lord, the God of their ancestors, so that he made them an object of horror, as you see. (30:7)

If you're unfaithful, things go bad. You've seen it throughout your history, time and time again. I'm reminded of that ominous description at the end of the book of Judges "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit". (Judges 21:25) Things had gone bad – and the people knew it: they were living with the consequences of what they, their parents and ancestors had done.

And this again can be a hard thing for us to come to grips with. We know that God is not harsh and vengeful, and yet we know that there were – and are – consequences of turning away from God. It's not that God punishes us, or that God turns his back on us, it's that if we choose to do the wrong things, to turn our backs on God, then those actions have consequences - for ourselves, our relationships, and ultimately for our society, too. Worshipping physical idols may not be an issue for modern people, but what about worshipping power? Worshipping wealth? What about our greed and envy? Or our pride and self-importance.

The letter goes on – "Do not be stiff-necked, as your ancestors were; submit to the Lord. Come to his sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever. Serve the Lord your God, so that his fierce anger will turn away from you." (30:8)

The term stiff-necked is often used in the scriptures to describe the attitude of Israel toward God (Exodus 33:3; Deuteronomy 9:13; Nehemiah 9:16; Acts 7:51), and it came from the description of an ox that refused to be directed by its driver. A stiff-necked animal (or person) refused to turn its head in order to go in a different direction,

So instead of being stiff-necked, Hezekiah urges the people to change direction – to submit, to yield to what God wants from them. Know God's sanctuary – his presence – which is everlasting. If the people – if we – stick with God, then God will stick with them. As the apostle Paul would later say in his letter to the Romans (8:38-39) " For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Importantly, 'serving the Lord your God', to the people of Hezekiah's time, meant honouring Jewish Law – the requirements of the Torah – such as the Passover. That was something that had truly fallen away during the reign of Ahaz. It you've ever taken part in a Passover meal, you'll know that every element is symbolic – every element is a reminder of God's relationship with God's people. While we might think of the Passover remembrance as a ceremony or ritual or even something like the traditional Christmas lunch we might have each year, Passover was more than a meal or a ceremony to the ancient people – it was a reminder of what God had done for their ancestors, and therefore for them.

Hezekiah's letter goes on to say, in the last verse of today's reading, "If you return to the Lord, then your fellow Israelites and your children will be shown compassion by their captors and will return to this land, for the Lord your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him." (30:9)

I like the 'if…then' phrasing. If you return to the Lord, then your fellow Israelites and your children will benefit. They will be shown compassion by those who have taken them captive, and they will be freed (they will 'return to this land'). And the promise is not just for the people of Hezekiah's time who read or heard the letter – it was for all of those to come as well 'and your children'.

Hezekiah tells his readers – way back then, and now as well – that God is gracious and compassionate, and he will not turn his face from you.

I think we modern Christians don't always remember that – or if we do remember that, we don't appreciate fully what it means. We get preoccupied with right and wrong – whether it's in

matters of conduct or ethics or theology (and of course we always think that we're right and everybody who disagrees with us is wrong).

We need to always remember that God is indeed gracious and compassionate, and – as the apostle John (1 John 4:8) says, "God is love."

This call to gather in Jerusalem for Passover was a revival. A revival of custom and tradition and ritual, certainly, but even more: it would be a revival of the peoples' relationship with God. A revival of faith and faithfulness, a revival of the nation living the way that God wanted them to live, a revival of hope.

The journey would not always be an easy one, and history shows us that things didn't work out as Hezekiah intended. The ultimate solution to the problems of the world wouldn't be realised for seven hundred odd years – when, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, as we heard in our New Testament reading, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith…There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

The journey from there to today has not always been an easy one either, and revivals have come and gone. But the hope remains.

To return to Vincent's question about the Uniting Church, "Has it been a success?"

What do you think? If we think about it in terms of numbers, then we'd probably have to say no.

But here we are, forty-eight years later, still worshipping, still serving, still living as God's faithful people, in a society that is mostly not interested in God at all.

Here we are, as the church, growing in the knowledge and love of God, supporting each other and praying for each other and being witnesses to our saviour, Jesus, today.

To the glory of God.

Amen