**Renewing of the covenant**  10/4/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 7, Hebrews 8

Text: 1Samuel 7:2-6

Psalms: 29, 99, 135:13-21, 139:23-24

There have been a number of revivals in the recent history of the church. The Wesley brothers, along with George Whitfield, saw a revival in England in the mid 1700’s. There was a Welsh revival a bit later. By ‘revival’ we mean a mighty work of the Spirit of God accompanying the preaching of the word. Revivals occur within a corrupt society and church. They are marked by confession of sin that is sincere and often public, prior to a whole-hearted return to the Lord. So it is that we pray for revival tody because we live in a society that is corrupt, and where Christians lack commitment to the Lord. The angel’s words to the church at Laodicea come to mind: ‘You are luke-warm, neither hot nor cold’ (Rev 3:16).

We don’t read of revivals in the OT but we do read of covenant renewals, and of the people of Israel returning to the Lord. Chapter 7 of 1Samuel is a case in point. Corruption of worship in the land resulted in judgment from almighty God. God’s judgment is never pleasant at the time; the key to God’s judgment is our response. The people of Israel suffered defeat at the hands of the Philistines, with the ark of the Lord being captured and their priest-leaders being killed. The ark was returned, but there was no revival and no returning to the Lord until twenty years later, as we see here in this chapter. The Lord’s blessing was confined to the household looking after the ark of the Lord. The rest of the people kept on living and worshipping like the pagan nations around them.

We pick up the story of the nation established by Yahweh, with Samuel returning to the narrative. We have not heard of Samuel for three chapters, not since he was established as a prophet of the Lord in all Israel (3:20). Presumably, he was prophesying during this time but no one was listening. When the Philistines attacked Israel, the elders had the ark of the Lord brought to the battlefield, hoping for better luck and victory in their fight against the Philistines. But they were defeated; Eli’s daughter-in-law summed up the resulting situation in the nation in the name Ichabod- ‘the glory has departed from Israel’ (4:21).

This situation continued for twenty years until self-pity and pagan worship in Israel gave way to them, ‘lamenting after the Lord’ (7:2). We might ask how much longer it will be before we see self-pity and pagan worship in our land give way to mourning and seeking after the Lord. We have just two major subheadings today: ‘All Israel lamented after the Lord’ and, ‘Assembly at Mizpah’.

**1. All Israel lamented after the Lord**

Samuel’s prophecy concerning Eli and his sons came true. The Lord established Samuel as a prophet in Israel. Presumably, he prophesied during the dark years of Philistine oppression, and with the ark of God being looked after by Abinadab at Kirjath Jearim; and presumably the people did not listen! We now learn that they were listening to pagan priests and crying out to foreign gods and Ashtoreths (7:3). Baal and Ashtoreth’s were the male and female gods of the Canaanites.

When Joshua brought the people into the land of Canaan they were told to destroy the gods of the land. But these gods kept popping up again and again. These were attractive gods, attractive in the sense of appealing to the lust of the eyes and of the flesh. They were fertility gods, whose worship was related to good harvests and fertile flocks. Worship of such gods involved ritual prostitution; pagan feasts were orgies of food and sex. One preacher comments that, chapel and brothel were conveniently at one location.

Back in my younger days, Hinduism and Hindu gurus became popular in the West. Young people were leaving the church and the vacuum in their lives was being filled by pagan religions. Hindu worship, like all pagan worship, is very sensual; drugs and sex heighten the ‘enlightenment’ obtained at worship ceremonies. This was the big attraction for the children of the sexual revolution in the West. The influence of these gurus has largely died with their deaths, but corruption of worship through sexual immorality continues, even in the church.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke of the seed that fell among thorns being like people who hear the word and start out well, but the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world choke the life out of such people. John writes of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life being ‘of the world’ and not compatible with love for God (1John 2:16). The life of the people in Israel in Samuel’s day was being choked by their lusts, to the extent that they eventually ‘lamented after the Lord’.

The life of many a Christian today is similarly being choked by their love for the world. It is not easy to turn away from such lusts, from such temptations, but until we do so, until we are brought to tears and brought to our knees in repentance before the Lord, we cannot call ourselves a follower of Christ. Remember the rich young ruler who loved Jesus, but when told to sell all that he had he went away sad. ‘One thing you lack’ said Jesus (Luke 18:22). What is the one thing keeping you from following Jesus whole-heartedly? It may not be something sinful in itself- riches are not sinful, nor is sex, and nor is family. These things are sinful when we put them before Christ. Are you able to put Christ before everything else in your life- everything else?

Repentance, as in turning away from the ‘loves’ or the ‘other gods’ in your life, is not easy. But Samuel told the people of Israel they must put away the Baals and Ashtoreths, and serve the Lord only. He said they must, ‘Return to the Lord with all your heart’ (7:3). I have referred to whole-hearted repentance and sincere repentance because our repentance is not always sincere. God is not fooled by a few tears, or even a lot of tears. ‘Could my tears forever flow, all could never sin erase’ wrote Augustus Toplady in the hymn, ‘Rock of Ages’.

I have seen people weeping as they confess their love for Christ, but seen little evidence of such love after their eloquent outburst. Repentance must be followed by a life commitment, a total commitment to Christ, and indeed of ongoing repentance, if it is genuine or sincere repentance. Remember, the Lord looks on the heart. And remember that he is a jealous God when it comes to your worship. ‘You shall have no other God before me’ is the first commandment.

Yahweh demands exclusive worship, unlike other gods. Hindus worship many gods and some think they can add Jesus to their collection of gods. When true Christians refuse to worship other gods, Hindus get upset. Our society is much the same; when we refuse to accept other religions as being true, or refuse to accept sinful conduct as okay, we are accused of being intolerant, and become targets of abuse. Tragically, many Christians have succumbed to this abuse, to this pressure from society or family, and no longer worship Jesus as he demands. Listen to what Jesus says about worshipping him: ‘He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me’ (Mat 10:37).

**2. Assembly at Mizpah**

When the people came to Samuel ‘lamenting after the Lord’ he told them to put away the foreign gods from their midst, and the people did so (7:3, 4). He told them to return to the Lord whole-heartedly, and they did so. Foreign gods were thrown out and they refused to love anything more than God. Repentance takes place in the heart of course, but it must also be tangible or must be seen. How would the people in Israel demonstrate the sincerity of their repentance? Presumably, putting way their idols meant burning or otherwise destroying them (7:4). Have you put away the thing or things that keep you from total commitment to the Lord?

Samuel called for further evidence of repentance and commitment from the people of Israel. He told them to gather at Mizpah where he would pray to the Lord for them (7:5). Gathering for worship is the most fundamental demonstration of sincere repentance and commitment to the Lord. If you truly love the Lord, you will love to be with the Lord’s people worshipping the Lord. Gathering for worship does not make you a Christian of course, but failing to gather with God’s people raises questions about the sincerity of your repentance and commitment to the Lord. If you have something more important to do than gather for worship, is not that thing more important to you than the Lord?

Samuel told the people to gather, ‘and I will pray to the Lord for you’ (7:5). This looks like a prerequisite, a necessary condition for him to pray for them. Samuel wasn’t taking phone calls as they sat in their homes, or called in from a party, a football match, or from doing the shopping! He told them to gather at Mizpah, and they did. Mizpah was a hill just north of Jerusalem; Mizpah means ‘watchtower’. It was an obvious place to gather, a central place and a place close to Ramah, Samuel’s home.

Samuel said he would pray to the Lord for the people. It would appear that they were being harassed by the Philistines, and maybe their crops were being destroyed, despite worship of Baal. Whatever it was, they had come to their senses and asked Samuel to intercede for them before the Lord. He first told them to repent or ‘return to the Lord with all your hearts’, and then to gather at Mizpah.

The first thing Samuel did at this assembly was draw water and pour it out before the Lord (7:6). What was this all about? It is hard to know. After drawing water it is usual to drink it, not pour it out on the ground. Pouring water out to the Lord may have symbolised repentance, the pouring out of one’s heart before the Lord. We pour out water in baptism as symbol of washing from sin.

The people went on to fast as they gathered at Mizpah. They fasted and prayed, ‘We have sinned against the Lord’ (7:6). All sin is against God and must be confessed before God. We saw that revivals in the church were similarly accompanied by public confession of sin. Fasting is still valid in as much as it focusses the body and mind on prayer; fasting and prayer go together. There is a time for feasting and also a time for fasting and prayer. Here in verse 6 we do not read that Samuel prayed, but when he told them to gather at Mizpah he said, ‘I will pray to the Lord for you’ (7:5). The people needed someone to intercede for them before the Lord, and this person was Samuel.

Samuel was a prophet, a man through whom the Lord spoke to his people. ‘And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah’ (7:6). As judge, he not only heard cases and gave decisions from the Lord, but was leader of the nation. Samuel was also priest, offering sacrifices to the Lord and interceding before the Lord on behalf of God’s people.

As prophet, priest and king, Samuel was a type of Christ. Our one and only prophet, priest and king under the new covenant is our Lord Jesus Christ. ‘There is only one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’ (1Tim 2:5). Do you call upon this mediator when you pray? You have no access to the throne of God apart from Jesus Christ, our prophet, priest and king.