

Sunday 24th January 2021

Daniel 3:1-30 (Faith convictions)

Talk by Russell Jones, Prayers by Hazel Willson

Welcome

Welcome to this morning's service. Today we will hear one of the greatest and best-known stories of God's deliverance of His people when they are threatened by ugly, ignorant, manipulative political power. As Christians, we are exiled in a secular world, and we are called to trust in God's purpose for us, that in all things he works for the good of those who love him. To begin, and to help us prepare for our time of worship, here is a passage from Isaiah 43 where God promises to deliver us, because we have already been redeemed:

'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.'

Now Hazel will lead us in our prayers.

Intercessions

God said to Joshua 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'.

Gracious Father, we come to you at the beginning of another week, thankful that you have given us the gift and privilege of praying for others and ourselves.

We come as individuals, with our particular needs; but also as part of your church at St John's; as part of the Christian community in the UK; and as part of the world-wide family of Jesus. Although you promised never to leave us, we can sometimes feel very alone – but also part of something amazing, your kingdom here on earth! Please forgive us that we often live as if you were not King of our lives, forgetting your promises and neglecting our brothers and sisters.

This last week has seen heights and depths; joys and sorrows – the excitement of the vaccine roll-out, but our NHS almost being overwhelmed: the celebration of the week of Christian Unity, but the depression of Blue Monday: the hope expressed at the US inauguration, but the despair of those badly affected by storm Christophe. Through all these changing scenes of life, you are with us – not a remote God, but one who promises never to leave us or forsake us. Thank you for your faithfulness.

Father of mercies, we pray for all who are facing persecution, and even death, because they love you. You hear the cries of the oppressed, and in your compassion you respond. You are the one who sets us free. You are the defender, deliverer and Redeemer for our persecuted family. Fight their cause and deliver justice for them. Though their enemies lay snares and traps for them, lead them out into wide open spaces, where they can walk with you in freedom and peace.

God of new beginnings, we pray for the new US President Joe Biden, as he takes up this great responsibility; and also for unity and reconciliation within that nation and its peoples, guided by you.

God of healing, we pray for our country and all front-line workers; for all NHS staff, for safety, energy and peace in dealing with each and every patient – for wisdom and good decisions from managers. We pray healing and peace for patients, and for their relatives who feel so helpless. We pray that the vaccines that we as a country are privileged to have may be effective, and Father we pray for a reprieve and an end to

this pandemic. Be with our emergency services, our shop workers and transport staff, and protect them from both the virus and abuse from frightened and frustrated members of the public.

Jehovah Jireh, our provider, we pray for all who are struggling economically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. Thank you for the provision, by State, churches and other organisations, and individuals, of food, care, debt support and love in various imaginative ways. Give to our politicians and other leaders wisdom and guidance for these unprecedented times.

Loving Father, we ask your help for our communities, our neighbours and our families – especially those known to us who are facing problems of any kind. The details are all known to you, but we ask for Audrey, Stan and his wife, Andy, Anthony, Zac, Julia, Sue, and Marcella – your presence, healing and peace of mind and heart. We lift quietly to you, many others known to us (Silence).

We pray for those seeking you through the Alpha course, and pray for the Team, and for your Holy Spirit's presence and gentle guiding.

Help us Father, to be a people who will proclaim your kingdom to the poor, and who will not flinch when faced with opposition – help us to trust you as Daniel and his friends did – and be prepared to stand up for your truth, justice and righteousness, in the special way that you have prepared each one of us to do.

*When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie
His grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply.
The flames shall not hurt you – His only design
Your dross to consume and your gold to refine.*

*The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose
He will not, he will not, desert to its foes.
That soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,
He'll never, no never, no never forsake.*

Thank you Father – and we ask that you will send us out this week, in the name of Jesus, and the power of the Spirit, to your glory. Amen

Reading Daniel 3.1-30

¹ King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide,^[a] and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ² He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. ³ So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

⁴ Then the herald loudly proclaimed, 'Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵ as soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.'

⁷ Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshipped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ At this time some astrologers^[b] came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'May the king live for ever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone

who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.’

¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, ‘Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?’

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us ^[G] from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.’

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude towards them changed. He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, ‘Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?’

They replied, ‘Certainly, Your Majesty.’

²⁵ He said, ‘Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.’

²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, ‘Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!’

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisors crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, ‘Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.’

³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Sermon

This must be the best piece of satire in the Bible. The story of a ruler, full of himself, showing off and garnering support, who is exposed as a self-important buffoon. He thinks he’s god, but he

learns the truth about the real God, and the way the writer tells these events is comic but also dramatic.

We met Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in chapters 1 and 2, with the story of his dream of a statue with a golden head. Daniel explained that this meant his impressive golden empire would be smashed to pieces by God's kingdom, but now we see that the king builds a huge image, all of gold. 'This is how you should see me!' he's demonstrating. The narrator says its dimensions are 90 feet high and nine feet wide, which is a mockery of the image straight away, because it would look very weird indeed and be dangerously unstable. It would in fact have had a large plinth, but the king's grandeur is being lampooned in the telling, and logically, there wouldn't be enough gold in the world then to make it so it must have been wood covered in gold.

This statue is an exercise in self-promotion but especially in political control, using religion and music as part of the ceremony. The king is worried how others see him, and that it might impact on his power. In verse 2 all of the Babylonian officials are listed, in descending order of their powers, satraps being the chief administrators and then all the way down to local officials. It's a gathering of the complete government, national and local, to impose the king's power on them. Having listed them all in verse 2, the author lists them all again in verse 3. When ... read it to us, did you think the writer was annoyingly repetitive, employing tedious detail? Well, the repetition shows that what the king orders in verse 2, he gets in verse 3, down to the last detail. This sets up the story's key faith message as well. This is a nation where conformity is essential and normal. Every Babylonian official does just what he's told. The assembled people are warned that they must do the same or die, with the herald's announcement to 'peoples, nations and men of every language' which reminds us we are in the capital of a mighty empire, and the conquered peoples are all paying homage in line with the king's desire. They have sold themselves into slavery. That's why the herald's words are repeated exactly by the narrator, just as in verses 2 and 3. No one disobeys Nebuchadnezzar if they know what's good for them, except the three Hebrews, our role models, shortly to appear in the story.

Before that we have the listing of all the musical instruments several times, by the herald, then the narrator, then the astrologers, and finally by the king himself. Each time the list appears, it offers a different satire: first on the pomp of the ceremony, all show and no substance, then on the sycophantic 'creeping' of the officials who accuse the 3 Hebrews who have been promoted over them – 'we were listening to the list of instruments, your majesty' – and finally on the king's insecurity – 'do you know how many musicians I've brought here to impress you?' Thank goodness they hadn't invented all the instruments of a modern orchestra!

When the lists are repeated, there are subtle variations, so the narrator mentions that 'all the peoples' bowed down, showing the universal willingness to obey, and when the astrologers repeat the king's decree, they make sure that they include the threatened death penalty for not obeying, so that the king is pressured to show his power and kill their rivals, these immigrants who have achieved higher positions in the state than them. They don't say 'these three Hebrews pay no attention to the decree' but they make it personal: 'they pay no attention to you, O king'. This is an important element in the story's meaning too, as these villains use patriotism and exploit religious difference – 'they're foreigners, O king, they have a different religion, not like us, O king; why have they been promoted over us, O king? We're loyal, we're like you.'

The king comes face to face with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and shows that, for all the pomp and showiness, he's not interested in their religious or national differences, but in their

conduct. Not what they think or say, but what they do. The king is a pragmatist beneath the surface – he knows the golden image is all political spin. He says ‘Worship the image or be thrown into the furnace’ – that is, ‘act as if you worship me in front of everyone, even if you don’t. Never mind my gods or your god, pretend you respect and fear my power.’

The answer of the three Hebrews in verses 16 and 17 is different to everything we’ve heard before. They don’t use the tedious, pompous listing, the repetition of the king’s decree, which even he has become caught up in. Enough of the political spin! They simply say ‘We are loyal to God, however powerful you are in worldly terms.’

The threat of the blazing furnace recalls some earlier Biblical texts. It is a metaphor for Israel’s suffering in Egyptian slavery, for God’s judgment, and for times of testing. It is used in the New Testament to depict hell, and by Peter when he writes of future persecutions of Christians as ‘fiery trials’; he was surely thinking of this story.

This is the moment of choice, a choice that has been faced by God’s people again and again. When we pray ‘Lead us not into temptation’, those words literally mean ‘Keep us from the time of testing’, and for the three men this is the time of testing. It is where the story becomes dramatic as well as comic.

The three could bow down to their earthly ruler, thinking ‘I’m only bowing with my body, not my heart. At least he won’t kill me and I can continue to serve God in this government in the future’. Instead the nature of the compromise is made clear. Idolatry or loyalty? In most translations, they doubt whether God can save them from the furnace, but they know God is willing to save. Nor do they know whether God will save them. They say ‘If the god we serve is able to save us, he will rescue us. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not worship the image of gold that you have set up’.

They trust the nature of God, his faithfulness, justice and righteousness. They don’t try to do a deal with god either – ‘help us and we will do something for you.’ They know God’s power, but don’t know whether he will exercise it to save them on this occasion. It is like praying for healing when we say ‘Lord, you have the power to heal and you love to do it. Please help...’; we ask, we trust, but we have to accept that not everyone we pray for will be healed. That doesn’t change God’s nature, and we learn to trust God more as we live and pray.

The furnace would have been for smelting ore, with an opening at the top to lower the ore inside, and windows to check on the process. It was heated with seven sets of bellows, and all were blown at once to superheat it to the point where soldiers were killed when flames burst out when the top was opened. This detail emphasises that the men’s survival is impossible, but echoes of earlier Biblical stories alert us to another outcome. Nebuchadnezzar exalted himself as if he were a god when he asked ‘What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?’ Sennacherib challenged Jerusalem ‘Have any of the gods of the nations delivered the lands out of my hand?’, and perhaps the fact that the men are bound is mentioned to remind us of Isaac being prepared for sacrifice, before God’s intervention provides an alternative in a bush. Remember from chapter 1 that these three are ‘without physical defect’, like the creatures to be offered as temple sacrifices. When the men are in the furnace, we might think of Moses being called from a burning bush that did not burn.

The fourth figure in the furnace was interpreted as an angel by the original readers, and is usually identified with Jesus in a pre-incarnation form by Christian readers. God delivers from

death through his Son. Unlike Isaac, the men are not delivered from the fire, but within the fire. The testing makes their faith stronger, and it functions as a witness. The rest of the story focuses on Nebuchadnezzar's reaction. He doesn't ask about the god, that has saved them in the furnace, not even his name, but orders everyone else to honour this god or he will punish them. He now ignores his new knowledge - that his political power is under God's control - and tries to use the demonstration of divine deliverance to reinforce his own position, his own 'image', the point of the statue and gathering in the first place. He is trying to use religious observance to reinforce his political control. It is still all about 'me and my power' for the king: 'the people of any nation or language who say anything against the Hebrew god will be cut into pieces'.

The king has been the only individual character in the story, and the only one who looks into the furnace and tells us what he sees there. Daniel isn't mentioned, I think because the author wants to present this as an example of collective loyalty, strength in union, not of individual heroism. Even the three Hebrews don't speak as individuals but as a collective. Their personal loyalty to God has a political outcome, a demonstration of God's control over all powers including hostile tyrants, but the king is never going to acknowledge that power. That's even if he has learned anything about God from what he has seen.

In a passage we read in the summer, and it's noticeable how this section of Isaiah keeps recurring in our teaching since then, these words appear: 'when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.' That's Isaiah 43 verse 2. God did not prevent Israel's suffering, their exile in Babylon, although he warned them how to avoid it through his prophets. He was with them in their fiery trial, in the midst of their suffering in today's passage, when they remained loyal to him. They were given the strength to endure, and the hostile society in which they had to live, benefited from their faithfulness.

The book of Daniel is in a different place in the Hebrew ordering of the Old Testament, placed in the middle of the books about life in Persia, following Esther and preceding Ezra and Nehemiah. It's about trusting in a better future, a newness that God will bring, even for those at the bottom, persecuted and exiled among a self-serving and dishonest world. The Gentile king remains obtuse, unaware of God's control, and this shows that those who are well off find their deepest needs and yearnings are not being met.

We can feel exiled, even despairing, when we live among those with radically different, self-serving values. This is how the two sections of the book of Daniel connect. The first six chapters show events where God intervenes in the lives of both exiles and kings in Babylon; the prophetic chapters 7 to 12 show God's interventions in international history, his plan for the world. Both parts of the book invite us to trust in Him, because He will fulfil His promises.

Blessing

To end our service this morning a final blessing.

*The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face towards you
and give you peace. Amen.*

