

Sunday 28th February 2021

Daniel 8: 1-27 (Predictions fulfilled)

Talk by Russell Jones, Prayers by Hazel Willson

Welcome to this morning's service. Today we will continue to hear about the prophetic visions revealed to Daniel, giving us a chance to reflect on God's view of history, and in particular how He sees evil actions by human tyrants. The frightening visions of the future in chapters 7 to 12 follow the promises of deliverance that came in the first half of the book, and when we combine the two, we see that we are called to trust in God's loving power, in his control of history, and in his care for us who each form an atom in the body of his people, the church.

Hazel will lead us in our intercessions.

Prayers

Let us come with confidence into the presence of our loving Father, knowing that we can cast all our cares on Him because He cares for us. Knowing that we are the apple of His eye, and that He planned and sent His only beloved son to die in our place, so that we can be with Him for ever. Thank you Father, that You are working Your purposes out year by year, and that the time is drawing nearer when the earth will be filled with Your glory as the waters cover the sea.

We confess that too often we doubt Your power, and turn our eyes from Your glory – putting ourselves on the throne of our lives and making a mess of things. We ask Your forgiveness and Your cleansing, so that we may again serve You in newness of spirit.

Father God, during this time of Lent, we take the opportunity to spend extra time with You, and to draw strength and comfort in these strange times from Your presence, and Your rescue-plan promised in Your word.

We lift to You this hurting world, and pray for all who suffer in various ways; those known to us, and those we will never know, but who are precious to You. We take comfort from the fact that nothing takes You by surprise; that You know the end from the beginning, and that for Your special people, nothing that is beneath Your feet can be over our head.

We pray for those who know You and those who do not, who are in despair – homeless, hungry frightened and sick – and we pray for all who brave dangerous situations to bring peace, comfort and wholeness. The news is full of Covid-19, but there are so many other problems as well. We pray for Your guidance and the reassurance that You see the big picture – and You have a purpose for it, though we cannot see it. Help us to trust You even though You guide us blindfold, and help us to let You lead and take the initiative.

Thank you for different technologies to help us make Your rescue-plan known to others; and we pray for the Alpha Course – for the Team members from St John's and Holy Trinity; and for all the guests, with their different personalities, questions and needs. May the gentle power of Your Spirit guide each of them on their journey towards You.

We pray too for the work of CAP, for Rachel, Lin, Gareth and all the volunteers; and for all who contribute to, and benefit from, the Foodbank – for the practical and spiritual support to those in great need.

God of the poor, friend of the weak, we pray for those suffering the inequalities and injustices of this world, and of our society. For poorer countries unable to access the vaccines, and those discriminated against because of race, gender, belief or class. Give us, we pray, hearts of compassion, like Jesus, that will not turn away or ignore.

We bring to You all known to us, who need healing and wholeness; including Will Stewart, Kath and Sam; Audrey; Karim's dad; Sue; Andy and Anthony – please add other names in your own hearts. May Your special peace be on them and within them.

We pray Father, for the future leadership of St John's and Holy Trinity. May the person You will call have courage to respond, trusting You to guide and sustain them. Give us hearts and minds open to the exciting future You have planned for our joint congregations.

More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of – and we pray for the World Day of Prayer this Friday, prepared by the women of Vanuatu in the Pacific – that through the day the voice of prayer will not be silent, nor the strain of praise die away. Thank you, Father, for the privilege of prayer – let us use it to lift our eyes from the muddle and mess of this world into Your almighty presence.

'God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm
You fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds you so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.
His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour
the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower'.

Help us, Father, to live in the light of these words, and in Your love this week – trusting You and the power of Your spirit. Amen.

Reading Daniel 8.1-27

In the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, I, Daniel, had a vision, after the one that had already appeared to me. ²In my vision I saw myself in the citadel of Susa in the province of Elam; in the vision I was beside the Ulai Canal. ³I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. ⁴I watched the ram as it charged towards the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against it, and none could rescue from its power. It did as it pleased and became great.

⁵As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between its eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground. ⁶It came towards the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at it in great rage. ⁷I saw it attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering its two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against it; the goat knocked it to the ground and trampled on it, and none could rescue the ram from its power. ⁸The goat became very great, but at the height of its power the large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up towards the four winds of heaven.

⁹ Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and towards the Beautiful Land. ¹⁰ It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. ¹¹ It set itself up to be as great as the commander of the army of the LORD; it took away the daily sacrifice from the LORD, and his sanctuary was thrown down. ¹² Because of rebellion, the LORD's people^[a] and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.

¹³ Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, 'How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled – the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the LORD's people?'

¹⁴ He said to me, 'It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated.'

¹⁵ While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man. ¹⁶ And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, 'Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision.'

¹⁷ As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. 'Son of man,^[b] he said to me, 'understand that the vision concerns the time of the end.'

¹⁸ While he was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet.

¹⁹ He said: 'I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end.'^[c] ²⁰ The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. ²¹ The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between its eyes is the first king. ²² The four horns that replaced the one that was broken off represent four kingdoms that will emerge from his nation but will not have the same power.

²³ 'In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a fierce-looking king, a master of intrigue, will arise. ²⁴ He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy those who are mighty, the holy people. ²⁵ He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.

²⁶ 'The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future.'

²⁷ I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.

Sermon

Would you like to see the future? I would quite like to see what this place is like in 1000 years, I think, but would hate to see just a few years ahead. It would be too much like Scrooge seeing his own corpse and grave.

Last week we heard chapter 7, where Daniel was shown the next five hundred years or so about where he lived, with the rise and fall of empires surrounding the nation of Israel. Chapter 8 recounts another set of visions of the future that Daniel was given about 2 years later than the ones we heard last week. They are similar of course in what they show of the next centuries, and in the way they show what was to occur, with beasts representing nations and rulers, but they may prophesy events thousands of years further into the future, into our future, as the angel Gabriel tells Daniel in verse 19 of 'the appointed time of the end' and in verse 26 'it concerns the distant future'. Another difference between chapters 7 and 8, apart from how far they look ahead, is the language they were written in. Chapters 2 to 7 were all in Aramaic, a language spoken widely across the region in that era, because they are giving a message to, and about, all the non-Jewish nations, showing their place in history from God's viewpoint, but chapter 8 onwards reverts to Hebrew, because this is a message for Israel, reassuring the exiles that God will still achieve his purpose through them in the whole of human history. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4, 'salvation comes from the Jews', just before he revealed his identity to her.

The first part of the chapter prophesied events that we can clearly identify in the centuries between Daniel and Jesus, but the later sections are not so clear.

The animals seen in Daniel's visions in 551BC, two years before the banquet of chapter 5 that warned of the fall of Babylon, repeat the historical figures and empires already seen in the visions of chapters 2 and 7. The ram with two horns of verses 3 and 4 is the empire of the Medes and Persians that conquered the region rapidly and destroyed Babylon ten years later. One horn is longer because the Persians were more numerous than the Medes, and eventually this became known only as the Persian empire. This is the event represented by the end of the golden head and the start of the silver chest in the statue of chapter 2, and of the lion being eaten by the bear in chapter 7. The Persian king, Cyrus, allowed the Israelites to return home and take the sacred vessels from the Temple with them, 70 years after their exile began, as God's promises made through his prophet Jeremiah were fulfilled right on time.

The Persian empire tried and failed to conquer Greece, leading to its own destruction by Alexander the Great, who is the goat of verses 5 to 8, and the leopard of chapter 7, which runs so quickly that its feet don't touch the ground, a reference to the speed of Alexander's future military success. He died suddenly of illness, aged 33. Horns symbolise military power in the Old Testament, so the unified Greek power under Alexander was divided between four of his commanders, the four horns replacing the one large one. Greek culture and language spread and unified the nations of the near East, and Alexander was unusual in his kindness to conquered peoples, actively trying to unite cultures rather than subjugate them. Common Greek is the language of the New Testament. You can see how God prepared the way for Christ long before Jesus' birth. Rome isn't featured in chapter 8, but it's clear that the brutal, efficient Roman empire established law, peace and security that enabled people to travel so that missionaries could spread the gospel.

The new part of this vision appears in verses 9 to 14 and is a specific reassurance to the nation of Israel. The little horn that grows out of the four successors to Alexander was Antiochus 4th, who gave himself the title Epiphanes when he usurped the throne of Syria by trickery. Epiphanes means 'manifestation' because he presented himself as a god, the 'Prince of the starry host' of verse 11. His nickname among his officials was Epimanes, which meant The Mad One. He tried to destroy Jewish religion and culture, sending 20,000 men in 168BC to Jerusalem, invading the 'Beautiful Land' of verse 9 and stealing all of the treasures and sacred objects from the Temple. He murdered almost all of the men, enslaved the women and children, and even sacrificed a pig on the Temple altar, the 'rebellion that causes desolation' of verse 13. In a wider campaign he outlawed circumcision, Sabbath observance, Jewish food observance, and executed anyone found with a copy of the law of Moses. After 3 years he was defeated by a much smaller force of Jewish resistance, led by Judas Maccabeus. Following a decisive battle at Emmaus, Temple worship was fully restored, exactly 1150 days after Antiochus established a pagan altar there, as predicted in verse 14. The tyrant died two years later. God promised that the evil of Antiochus would be destroyed, on a specific day, and it was, so we can trust his prophecies about the future where no specific days are given.

The second half of chapter 8 parallels the first, and is usually interpreted as a prophecy of the end times, that is the period before the final day of God's judgment on the earth, when an Antichrist will gain power through deceit and self-promotion, will oppose Jesus Christ, the Prince of Princes of verse 25, and will try to replace him. He will persecute God's people but – verse 25 - 'will be destroyed, but not by human power'. What will the antichrist be like? Well, he'll be like Antiochus; he will be a nobody at first, sneaking into power; he'll make great claims about himself and blaspheme God, persecuting Jews; he'll impose his own religion; he'll be a skilful liar – 'truth will be thrown to the ground' verse 12; he'll be opposed by a remnant of believers; he'll seem invincible but will be defeated by a redeemer. Antiochus was defeated by Judas Maccabeus; the Antichrist will be defeated by Jesus the Christ.

Christians are suffering persecution in many countries; there were murderous attacks on Christian worshippers and churches in northern Nigeria the week before I wrote this talk. All kinds of denials and restrictions on Christian observance and message are becoming prevalent in our own society. This passage offers solace and encouragement when we feel discouraged because God is in control of tyrants, even though they are given a free choice to work their evil for a time. It is a question of viewpoint. When Napoleon marched into Moscow in 1812, he thought he had conquered the whole of Europe, subjugated the Austrian and Russian empires, and would next control the whole world. With hindsight, he was a deluded, egotistical, jumped-up ass. When Hitler reached the suburbs of Moscow in 1941, he thought he had conquered...and so on, word for word. With hindsight, he was both thoroughly evil and thoroughly deluded. That's comforting, because when we read Daniel chapters 8 to 12, it is as if we are receiving the comfort of that viewpoint, of hindsight, in advance. We can trust that God has a purpose and that human evil will not overcome His purpose.

Are you thinking about current world leaders now, looking for the Antichrist? People have done that for centuries. Various Popes have been offered as contenders, which looks pretty unlikely since medieval times. Napoleon, Mussolini and Hitler have all been called antichrists.

Please don't start searching the news columns for signs of the end times. When we look at this chapter, it is Daniel's reception of the visions and angelic explanations that is the most interesting part for Christians now. He watches but doesn't understand, and is questioning what he sees. He tells us that 'before me stood one who looked like a man', not 'before me stood a man' – he is not sure even whether to trust his eyes. Daniel becomes ill, suffering physical collapse for several days; he is appalled by what he sees and accepts it is beyond comprehension. He has the vision explained to him by the angel named Gabriel, who acts as messenger in other Bible stories, but Daniel isn't keen to appear knowledgeable before others – 'I know something you don't know'. He is upset by the suffering of his people to come. Unlike modern prophets (see YouTube, no actually please don't) who use the messages they claim to have been given by God to show off, and persuade Americans to vote Republican, Daniel is burdened by the truth. He gradually recovers and goes back to work, humbly. God had more to teach him, as we shall see in future weeks.

A prayer: Father, thank you for your word, for your reassurance that your will will be done in this world. Help us to trust in your promises as we live day-to-day, whether we are in a time of feasting or fasting. Amen.

Blessing

1 Thess 5.23-24

²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

God bless you. Please have a good week.