

Sermon – 17/06/2007 am

Who was Daniel?

Study Text: Daniel 1:1-2

‘Daniel in the Lions Den’ is one of the best known and best loved children’s stories. The story of his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego being thrown into the fiery furnace is also well known. These stories have given rise to songs like ‘Dare to be a Daniel’ and other gospel songs. I loved the Johnny Cash song about ‘Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, into the fire they must go’. These stories and songs come from this book of the Old Testament called Daniel.

Daniel is called a prophet by Jesus (Matthew 24:15) for he speaks of God’s plan for the future. But he is somewhat different to the other prophets in that God spoke to him in visions and dreams, in pictures and symbols, in what is called apocalyptic style. He spoke about things in the distant future, things even Daniel did not understand, things which Jesus and then the writer of Revelation picked up and elucidated.

Most of the prophets lived in Israel and spoke the word of God to the people of God. Daniel lived in a foreign land among a strange people. He spoke to these gentiles, as well as to the people of God. ‘Daniel is God’s prophetic mouthpiece to the gentile and Jewish world, declaring God’s present and eternal purpose’.

Daniel’s Time

Daniel was 16 years old when he was carried off to a strange land, from Jerusalem to Babylon. He came from the nobility in Israel. He was carried off by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, who had besieged Jerusalem and defeated the king of Judah, Jehoiakim. *The Lord gave Jehoiakim into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar (1:2).*

Worship and morality in the land of Judah had been in decline for some time. Manasseh was the worst of the kings. He sacrificed children in the fire, practiced witchcraft, and consulted mediums. Outwardly they were still worshipping God but they had departed from his commands. They were disobeying the covenant commands given through Moses. They were in rebellion against their God, and God accordingly declared his judgment upon them.

Jeremiah was God’s chief spokesman during the latter days of the kingdom. Jehoiakim became king in 608 BC after his father Josiah was killed trying to stop the Egyptians advancing to the north. *Jehoiakim did evil in the eyes of the Lord his God (II Chronicles 36:5).* He was the king who burned the scroll of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 36). He did this because in this scroll the Lord declared that the king of Babylon would come and destroy Judah and Jerusalem.

Neither the king nor the people would accept this word from the Lord. They refused to listen, but turned upon the prophet and persecuted him. In the same year (605 BC) Nebuchadnezzar came and besieged the holy city. He had just defeated the Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish, thereby gaining control over Israel.

The siege of Jerusalem was brief, for Nebuchadnezzar it seems got news of his father's death and returned to Babylon, but not before he entered the temple and taking some of the vessels as trophies for his god. He also carried off some of the young nobles.

It was in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim in Judah. This became the first year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. In the books of Kings and Chronicles this is referred to as the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim. Some scholars are troubled by this disparity and suggest reasons for the difference. There is some indication that the Babylonians numbered the years differently to the Jews. What the Jews called the fourth year the Babylonians called the third year. Daniel was writing in Babylon and indeed in Aramaic much of the time. We know how some people say 'she is one year old' but others that 'she is in her second year'.

Holy City

The palace of the king of Judah was next to the temple in Jerusalem. Life and worship for the Jew was centred upon the temple in the holy city. All the people came to this temple to worship God. God's presence was in this temple, above the Ark of the Covenant. God provided for his people and protected them from generation to generation according to his covenant promise.

The people, however, failed to keep the covenant. Their disobedience ultimately led to the Lord departing from the temple. Through Jeremiah he declared that Jerusalem would be given into the hands of Gentiles.

The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand (1:2). Daniel, who wrote this book that bears his name, recognised the hand of the Lord in this captivity. It was not that God was no longer sovereign; it was not that God was no longer powerful; it was not that God had forgotten his people. God was punishing his rebellious people.

The name Daniel means 'God is judge'. God was judging his people for their wickedness in turning away from him. 'They worship me with their lips but their hearts are far from me'. They had come to presume upon God. They thought they could do anything they wished – God would not see, God did not care. But God does see and God does care. Judgment will begin at the house of God.

Daniel suddenly found himself in a foreign land, unable to go to the house of God. How would he cope spiritually? Would he fall away and become like those around him. This is the challenge that faced Daniel, a challenge he shared with other exiles and a challenge he shares with us today. We who believe in Jesus are citizens of heaven, not of this world (Philippians 3:20). We are foreigners in this city, just like Daniel was in Babylon.

Daniel is like another young man called Joseph. Joseph was carried off to Egypt after his brothers sold him a slave. He was tempted by Potiphar's wife, and tested in other ways. But he obeyed God, and God was with him. In the end he could say to his wicked brothers of his ordeal in this foreign land 'you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good'.

Heathen City

Nebuchadnezzar took the holy vessels and put them in *the treasure house of his god (1:2)* – probably a god called Marduk. They were like a thank offering to his god for the victory he

had just won. He believed that his god had helped him in battle, but Daniel makes clear that the Lord gave Jehoiakim into his hand. The God of Israel was still sovereign and always will be. The next king learnt this truth when he took these holy vessels to drink from at a party (5:2).

How was Daniel going to live in this heathen environment? He was only a young man but had to decide. We all have to decide at some time in our life. I was just 17 when I left home and came to live in the city. I had to decide. Maybe it was later in life that you had to decide how you will live in this city – this heathen city. I had to decide again when I went to India. How will I live in this foreign land, in the midst of idolatry?

Idolatry is all around us today. Evil images confront us wherever we go in this city. I remember getting off the plane in Frankfurt years ago to be confronted by a poster of a near-naked woman. It was a shock after years in India. At the click of a button pornographic images will appear on your computer screen. Idolatry comes in many forms. Joseph had to face one form and Daniel another. You will face it some way. How will you then live?

Daniel wrote to encourage the exiles in Babylon. We know how they felt from Psalm 137. They could easily have thought like the Babylonians that the Lord their God was defeated, or that he was not longer caring for them. They could have gone along with their neighbours in idol worship. Daniel determined in his heart to obey God and stand firm on the promises of God.

The Lord used Daniel in a mighty way in this foreign land. He was not only respected by the king but feared by him, because he was a man who honoured God. God did wonders through Daniel and declared the future through him.

The first half of this book of Daniel (2:4-7:28) is written in Aramaic, the language of the local people. Through interpreting the dream of the king, and the writing on the wall, Daniel declared the will of God to the king. The king of Babylon was humbled before the Lord God of Israel. *Truly your God is the God of gods ...the revealer of secrets (2:47).*

Daniel's visions are mostly written in Hebrew for the benefit of the exiles. Daniel read his Bible and prayed every day. He had visions at such times in which the Lord revealed to him his plans for the future and even for the end of the world. His time, and the time of the exiles in Babylon would come to an end. The Lord their God had not forgotten them. The heathen city would be judged by God and so would other nations in the days ahead.

Daniel did not understand all that was revealed to him. With the help of the New Testament we can understand more but still not all that has been revealed. The end is yet to come. But like Daniel we can be faithful followers of Jesus in a foreign land. Let us press on in the knowledge that Daniel's God and our God is sovereign over the nations, sovereign over atheists, sovereign over the rich and powerful, and sovereign over all other gods. He truly is King of kings and Lord of lords. The whole world is in his hand; yesterday, today and forever, amen.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon