

14th July 2024 – Daniel 4 ‘The king’s fall and restoration’

Every so often I go on a short pilgrimage. Not the usual kind of pilgrimage, I must confess. Mine is to the National Gallery in London and specifically to the two rooms filled with paintings by Rembrandt. Some of you know I studied art history, so the National Gallery was a sort of home from home in my early 20s. There are dozens of paintings that I love and like to spend time with – but the two I head for *now* are Rembrandt’s two self-portraits: the first was painted when Rembrandt was 34 and at the peak of his powers; he paints himself dressed in expensive fur with one arm resting on the wall, consciously imitating a pose from a famous Italian Renaissance painting. (SLIDE) He’s wealthy, famous, the most celebrated artist in Europe. And you can see it in his eyes – it’s the 17th-century equivalent of Cristiano Ronaldo’s goal celebration in front of all his adoring fans. ‘Look at me, I’m the man.’

The second self-portrait was Rembrandt’s last, painted just a few months before his death, aged 63, penniless and broken. By this time he’s been through failed marriages, money scandals and the loss of his exalted position in society. He consciously paints the same pose for himself as he did 30 years earlier, but now he’s not in fur anymore, in fact he’s in an old brown smock, painted against a background of similar colour. The old Rembrandt almost fades into the canvas, and yet he also carries a new humility and compassion which touches me profoundly. His fall from grace has ironically allowed him to find true grace, to find himself as a beloved child, whose infinite value is not bound up with his sublime talent or worldly success. (Remove slide) A few years before, he painted the remarkable ‘Return of the Prodigal Son’, which many see as Rembrandt painting his own life story. He is the lost son now returned to the lovesick Father, broken yet restored, a man who now sees life as it really is.

As I sit before these paintings, I go to reflect on the transience of life, on the deceitfulness of human glory, on the beauty of humility and on **the spiritual journey we all must take**. Like the Japanese art of Kintsugi which mends broken pots, creating something even more beautiful in the process, indeed whose beauty is found in the way the broken pieces are put back together, Rembrandt’s brokenness is profoundly beautiful. The Lord has humbled his pride, but he now truly knows himself, and, I believe, he knows his Lord, too.

Rembrandt’s journey leads us into our story for today. As we’ve seen over the last couple of weeks, **King Nebuchadnezzar is also on a spiritual journey**. As the most powerful person in the world at the time, this journey has been played out in the public spotlight. It began with a dream in ch2, which led to him meeting Daniel and glimpsing the God of gods and the Lord of kings for the first time. As a result, he promoted and praised Daniel, but it’s noteworthy that although he commends God as the ‘revealer of mysteries’ he does not praise God directly. In fact, he massively misinterprets what God is trying to tell him by erecting a great golden statue and commanding everyone to worship it. As I reflected last week, this was possibly him thinking that perhaps if he made a whole statue of gold, then the other empires of silver, bronze and iron wouldn’t be able to succeed him!

Either way, it led to another encounter with godly followers of the Lord – this time Daniel’s friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who refused to bow down to this statue, and who were miraculously saved in the fiery furnace. This time Nebuchadnezzar sees a heavenly being in the fire and does praise God directly – which is progress! But he also commands that anyone who doesn’t worship this God be executed and their homes reduced to rubble, so he hasn’t quite got there yet!

Anyway, the narrative now switches to the first person: King Nebuchadnezzar himself tells the rest of his story, and again it begins with a dream. The shortened version we read didn't include the detail, but basically it's of a great tree, which gets cut down to its stumps by a heavenly messenger, leading to prolonged period in the wilderness, living with the animals, until it is acknowledged that 'the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of the earth and gives them to anyone he pleases.' The dream ends there, but the interpretation doesn't: Daniel tells the king that he is that tree, and if he does indeed humble himself and give glory to God, he will be restored.

Let's answer the obvious question first: much ink has been spilt discussing whether this actually happened. Historical evidence doesn't shed light conclusively either way, but its truthfulness is most probably located in its unlikeliness. I mean who would make this kind of thing up about the world's most feared tyrant?? It's even more improbable that a conquered people would dare to write it down and circulate it, unless it was sanctioned. Truth, in this case, really is stranger than fiction.

And let's also observe that Nebuchadnezzar probably already knew what the dream meant when he called for Daniel. He saw the heavenly messenger cutting the tree down and giving the message about human rulers acknowledging the ultimate rule of the Most High – he was probably hoping Daniel would say something else, but he didn't! As always Daniel was respectful, but he told it how it was. Initially the king probably did take it on board, as it took a year before he went back to the old pride, but as we all know, resolutions rarely last, and so 12 months later he was back to his boasting: 'Is this not the great Babylon I have built?' Cue the voice from heaven and the king's downfall.

But **this is a story of grace**. Nebuchadnezzar's fall was dramatic and costly, but it was temporary. As soon as he humbled himself, and raised his eyes towards heaven, both his sanity was restored and his kingdom. But this is a different king now – as he confesses: (v37) 'Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just.'

And so, unlikely as it sounds, perhaps the great Nebuchadnezzar really did undergo a remarkable spiritual transformation. And whilst we may marvel at it – and may it give us hope to keep praying for those close to us who seem hardened to God's love – King Nebuchadnezzar is also, in his way, a prophetic sign, paving the way for a new understanding of what true godly leadership is.

600 years later another king entered this world, and another tree took centre stage, one on which this king was lifted up – not to be worshipped, but to be mocked and insulted. The placard which hailed him as king was designed to be ironic but spoke a greater truth than those standing nearby realised. This king had taught that the only path to greatness was humble service, and just 24 hours previously had washed his friends' feet, the task assigned to the lowliest slave in the household. Shortly after his death his followers began to live in the same way, and the idea of humility before the Most High took root as a defining quality of real leadership.

The old Nebuchadnezzar of chs 2 and 3 would have had no idea what this kind of king was about; but perhaps the Nebuchadnezzar of chapter 4 would have understood, after all. Today, we worship this King – the King of kings – who comes to us gentle and lowly, and who alone can grant us rest. And our spiritual journey may not be as dramatic, but it is likewise a journey towards grace, towards trust, towards humility. Yes, pride comes before a fall – but in the kingdom of heaven, that fall is only an opportunity for restoration. This was Rembrandt's journey, this was the king's journey, and this can be anyone's journey. And may the Lord grant us all grace to praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. Amen.