

7th July 2024 – Daniel 3 ‘The fiery furnace’

In 1968, the US State of Vermont outlawed roadside billboards and large signs, in order to protect the state's scenic vistas. This ban remains in force to this day, however, human beings are good at getting round laws they don't like, and one unintended consequence was the appearance across the state of large, bizarre "sculptures" adjacent to businesses. For example, one car dealer commissioned a twelve-foot, sixteen-ton gorilla, clutching a real Volkswagen Beetle. Elsewhere, a carpet store showcased a nineteen-foot genie holding aloft a rolled carpet as he emerges from a smoking teapot. Other sculptures include a horse, a rooster, and a squirrel wearing red braces. Legal, but none of them arguably enhancing the scenic views!

Today's famous story starts with possibly the greatest ever example of the law of unintended consequences. Chapter 2 finishes with King Nebuchadnezzar praising Daniel's God as the Lord of kings, and we might think that perhaps he's had some sort of radical conversion experience. Unfortunately, what happens next runs to the opposite extreme. Flushed with the knowledge from his dream that he is the golden head of a great statue (representing earthly power), and 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, the king sets up an enormous statue made entirely of gold, possibly of himself, and commanded everyone to worship it. Clearly, this wasn't quite what God had in mind when he gave the king his dream!

And **it gave all God's faithful followers a terrible dilemma**. Idolatry – worshipping other gods – is clearly forbidden by scripture: the first commandment is to worship to no other gods but the Lord, and the second commandment is not to make idols. So, to be faithful to the Lord, it's a hard 'no' – but we all know what happens to people who don't obey Nebuchadnezzar. This is literally a life-or-death decision for all of the faithful Jews living in Babylon at the time. [PAUSE]

Someone once defined culture as 'the way things are done around here' and this is a helpful way to approach this passage in our cultural context. One thread which you can see running throughout history is that power likes to force conformity upon its people, and for an absolute ruler like Nebuchadnezzar, this takes the form of blunt coercion: 'Do this or die!' But there is also something more subtle going on – the early verses of the chapter keep repeating long lists: we get the 'satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the other provincial officials' and the 'sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music'. Why does the writer keep repeating these phrases?

It's all about forcing conformity. We humans are social beings, and the king is trying to create a culture where everyone does as they're told. He's creating a *culture*, which blankets everybody. Hence the repetition (and it's a brilliant piece of writing) – it's a way of saying: everyone knows their place, everyone is meant to do this, so get in line!

It's why people of real faith are seen as such a threat. You might have found yourself wondering why, for example, Christians are so heavily persecuted around the world today, as well as other groups: if they are largely model citizens, who believe in helping their neighbour, not committing crimes, paying their taxes, and living peacefully – why would any government be threatened by them?

It's about who we worship. We worship Someone greater, and the powers of this world know deep down that they will never have our first allegiance. And the reality is that sinful, prideful power hates that – they need the illusion of control, they need to know that we will fall in line. They also resent the idea that they might be answerable to Someone, a divine power, even greater than them.

And in today's story, the people who have to make the life-or-death decision, who have to decide if they can refuse to worship a false god, are Daniel's friends. And although it might seem strange that some of the astrologers saw a chance to attack them, given that Daniel and his friends had saved their lives recently, let's remember that Daniel's revelation in ch2 also humiliated them by solving what they couldn't. So, no doubt some of them saw their chance for revenge, cleverly playing to the king's vanity. They present Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's behaviour as an attack on the king himself, and not just an act of conscience. And of course, the king's ego immediately goes into overdrive, and the Babylon Three are summoned, and given the ultimate choice: conform or be executed.

Sadly, this type of choice has been the repeated experience of people of faith throughout history: the Romans did exactly the same to the early generations of Christians, and there are dozens of countries around the world *today* where Christians must practise their faith in secret or face a similar choice. This story might read like a rollicking good tale to us, more like an inspiring legend, but it is very precious to hundreds of millions of Christians today, because it is not just a story, it is their world. It is their direct experience. To follow Christ in large parts of the world means deciding to be ready to make this kind of choice.

And what we see in Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's answer to the king is **an outstanding example of courage and trust**. Verse 17-18 is one of my favourite passages in all of scripture, because it combines deep trust with the realism of a settled conviction: 'If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. 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.' Wow. What an answer. Let the cards fall where they may: we will worship the Lord. Great courage, great conviction, great trust.

In fact, what we see here is what you might call the difference between faith and trust. Faith is about what we believe, and that means that in some senses it is hypothetical. We believe in certain things that are not yet put to the test. But **trust is faith in action**. Trust acts on the consequences of our faith. It's like the old exercise of having someone stand behind you and falling backwards. Faith is willing to stand there and believe you'll be caught. Trust actually leans backwards and does it.

And the heart of our message today is this: **all of us are called not just to believe in the Lord, but to trust him**. To *act* on the basis of our faith. To make choices and decisions which reflect our faith. To change bits of our lives on the basis of our faith. It's why the modern baptism service which we use asks, very deliberately, 'Do you *trust* in Christ as Lord?' Not just believe, that's relatively easy. But trust – that's hard, that's gritty. That calls us to put the Lord first regardless. That's the bit that means we might not conform to our culture. That's the bit which quietly asks: what are you prepared to give up or change for the sake of your faith? [PAUSE]

Did Daniel's friends go into that fire expecting to live or die? We don't know. What we do know is that from that point they left it entirely to God. And, yes, there was a 'happy ending' – God miraculously saved them, and Nebuchadnezzar made another significant step on his spiritual journey. But that is not the ultimate point of the story. This book was written to a small group of faithful believers living in a strange culture, tempted to give up. And the point it makes again and again is: **God honours faithful obedience. Trust the Lord and he always repays. That is the message for us too**. Yes, this story is a call to pray for Christians around the world who face this kind of struggle daily. But it's also for us: we may not face death for our choices, but we live in a culture trying to squeeze us into its mould. Which idols are we constantly being told to bow down to? Which voices are forcing us to keep our faith in a little box labelled 'private'? May the Lord grant us the courage and trust of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that we too might live as the Lord's faithful followers, whatever life throws at us. Amen.