

4th August 2024 – Daniel 7 ‘The Ancient of Days’

Like many of you, I’m a great one for solving puzzles. Whether it’s Murder Mysteries or riddles, we love cracking a code. The latest puzzle craze is what are known as Escape Rooms – if you’re not familiar with the idea, it’s what it says on the tin: a room in which people are locked, and where they solve a series of puzzles within a certain amount of time to find the key to unlock the room. We’ve done a couple of these as board games in our lounge, but one of the things we still want to do is to go to a real Escape Room. And where better to do this than in the city of Milton Keynes, geographical home of Bletchley Park, the ultimate codebreakers. This area is steeped in the history of Bletchley Park: thousands of people were billeted round here, Wavendon House in our parish was one of the secret outstations with an enigma machine, and until 2018 we still had a congregation member who had actually worked in one of the huts.

We love cracking codes. But sometimes that love of codebreaking isn’t to our advantage. One of the great traps we fall into is to treat the bible as some sort of code – particularly the most colourful prophetic bits, like Revelation and the second half of Daniel. After all the famous stories of chapters 1-6, today we get onto the hard bit of Daniel, the bit where nearly everyone stops reading. If The Lion’s Den is one of the best-known stories of the whole bible, the very next section is one of the least known, full as it is of fantastical visions, with weird beasts and strange timescales. Having just listened to the first part of it, we might feel like Daniel at the end of the chapter: (v27) ‘I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself.’

We do we make of all the imagery? Before we take a closer look, I want to suggest that **the main message of our passage is very simple, and it’s at the end of our reading: (v18) ‘The holy people of the Most High (i.e. God) will receive the kingdom and will possess it for ever – yes, for ever and ever.’** If it’s not too cheeky to say this, think of this whole section of scripture as bit like Where’s Wally – don’t get distracted by all the colourful detail: find the central character and keep your eyes fixed there.

This book was written to a small, exiled community living in a strange culture. They had spent decades there and must have been doubting if the Lord would rescue them, restore them to their own land again. Does God still even *like* them? The heart of the whole book of Daniel, and the great reassurance to all the Lord’s faithful people, is here in this little verse: it’s God saying, ‘don’t worry! I am still in control, the kingdom of God is still yours’; or, as the text says: ‘the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it for ever.’

Note that this is entirely God’s gift: we don’t take the kingdom, or earn it – we receive it. God gives the blessings of his kingdom to his faithful followers, it’s his gift. And it’s an eternal gift: he doesn’t take the present back if the recipient is a bit ungrateful. It’s still given. God’s promises are eternal – and he knows that we struggle to believe that, hence he repeats it, to make sure we get the message: we will possess the kingdom for ever – *yes, for ever and ever!*

So if the message is that simple, why all the beasts and stuff? This type of writing is known as apocalyptic, which means it’s focused on the big picture of universal history, especially God’s resolution of all things. It looks forward, but it’s not meant to be a precise code describing the events of history. It’s picture language, and in many ways the whole point of using pictures is to remind ourselves that ultimately the only reality will be God’s kingdom – the other stuff will fade away. It’s not as real as it appears now. It passes, it disappears, like a thick mist on a summer’s morning, which seems so powerful but then, *pffft*, it’s gone.

But what of the actual vision itself? Let’s not ignore that: and if it sounds vaguely familiar, then you only have to turn back to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2 to get echoes of what we see here. There are four kingdoms again, and most scholars agree it’s the same four kingdoms we saw earlier: the Babylonians (here depicted as a lion v4), then the Medes (a bear v5), followed by the Persians (a leopard v6).

Then comes the terrifying fourth beast, which is 'very powerful' (v7) and which is the one Daniel really wants to know about in our passage. This is the Greek Empire, and in particular the devastating impact of its 'iron teeth and bronze claws' (v19) is thought to describe the reign of Alexander the Great. After his early death, the kingdom divides, but ruling over part of it – including Israel – is a powerful royal dynasty, the Seleucids, and the ten horns (v20,v24) are the rulers of that dynasty for about 150 years.

And then a particularly nasty 'little horn' appears: the notorious Antiochus Epiphanes (ruled 167-164BC) who desecrates the temple and triggers the Maccabean revolt in Israel. This is a very famous part of Jewish history which is covered in the bit of the bible called the Apocrypha. Antiochus was a very wicked ruler, who did away with his rivals for the throne – referenced by 'subdue three kings' in v24 – and who then oppressed God's people, as noted in v21 'waging war against the holy people' and v25 'speaking against the Most High and oppressing his holy people'.

So there are echoes of actual history; but the real point is what it means. And we learn three simple but profound things: **first, human empires come and go, they never last.** Lions, bears and leopards are all scary creatures, and might seem invincible – but each of them eventually passes away – in fact they often attack each other. However great they may appear, they never last forever. In other words – people of God: stay focused on the Lord. No human power is greater than our God – keep your eyes on the prize, on God's kingdom. That's the only one that really endures.

Second, there really is nothing comparable to the glory of the only God. Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days in vv9-10 is totally awe-inspiring. A flaming throne, a river of fire, a hundred million attending (10,000 x 10,000). There are some impressive human courts, not least the impressive Palace of Versailles which is the backdrop to some of the Olympic events at the moment – but that's nothing compared to this heavenly court. And this court sits in judgement on the affairs of humanity. All those great beasts are judged and destroyed. Human ego and power really is the ultimate vanity – it puffs itself up, and look how the horn is still boasting before the throne of God before it faces its judgement. But it's pathetic in the face of Almighty God, the King of kings and Lord of lords. God allows it to live for a period of time, but if it's corrupt and oppressive, he doesn't allow it to last forever – he acts and brings it to an end.

This is a great comfort to the many millions of believers living under oppressive human regimes around the world. We are fortunate to enjoy freedom here – but imagine reading this passage as a believer in a country where it's illegal for Christians to gather or to own a bible, or to speak about their faith. **God is on the throne! He has all the authority, glory and sovereign power!**

But – and this is the final and perhaps most wonderful thing we see – he gives this authority, glory and power to someone else. Someone who initially appears insignificant – 'one like a son of man' – a human being. But no ordinary human: this person 'comes with the clouds of heaven' (v13) and is led into the very presence of the Lord. His coming is so glorious that 'all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him.' (v14) And his power is eternal, his kingdom will never be destroyed.

Who is this son of man? It's Jesus! How do we know this? Jesus uses this name 'son of man' 69 times in the gospels, quite deliberately pointing people towards this passage, this vision of Daniel. He's telling us clearly that the Son of Man is also the Son of God. Indeed, when he was questioned about his identity by the authorities after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, he quotes this very passage: 'You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.' (Matt 26:64)

How amazing: 550 years before he was born, Daniel met Jesus in his dream – though he could not have known it at the time. And whilst we rightly worship a human Saviour, who comes to us gentle and lowly, today reminds us of Jesus' *eternal* identity, and the Jesus we too will one day meet. Jesus is the one with all authority, glory and sovereign power, worthy of global worship, whose kingdom will never pass away, nor be destroyed. Hallelujah! Amen.