

This morning we're starting a new sermon series on the book of Daniel and today we're going to be looking at Chapter 1.

Knowing when and where to draw the line can be a challenge!

Or maybe, knowing when to compromise and at what point to take a stand.

Our family saying is, "Up with that I will not put!"

It's unsure where the expression to draw the line comes from and there are lots of theories.

Some think it comes from the lines drawn on the real tennis court at Hampton Court. It may come from the French Court where lines were drawn to establish boundaries, etc, etc.

But we know what it means

That we won't go beyond a certain point in a situation.

And we're going to discover where Daniel decided to draw the line.

The events in the book of Daniel happened between 605 and 530 BC, so of course we're in the Old Testament.

Israel had been divided in two some 300 years previously and the northern kingdom, Israel, had been destroyed by Assyria.

Israel's God is our great sovereign God – the one true God – but the people have turned away from him.

They've worshipped other gods, perverted justice in the land and ignored God's laws. God warned that his people would be exiled from the land if they continued to disobey him and ignore him.

And now God has decided to draw the line, he'd had enough – the people have broken their covenant with him –

and the prophets' warnings and predictions about the fall of Jerusalem have come true.

The Babylonians repeatedly attacked Judah, the southern kingdom.

They destroyed the capital city of Jerusalem, razed the temple and took away prisoners of war.

Among them four bright young men – talent spotted – specially selected to be educated and groomed for the king's service.

Daniel and his three colleagues were teenagers, probably about the age of our young people going off to university – also to undertake a three year course.

I can't imagine what it must have been like to be taken captive, prisoners of war, thrust into a completely alien environment and brainwashed with the purpose of completely eradicating their Jewish identity.

And I can only applaud their parents and those who have educated them so well, how deeply they are rooted in their faith.

They were isolated from their homes and families, their culture and their religion, with the intention that they would be fully integrated into every aspect of Babylonian life, culture, thought and, of course, the worship of Babylonian gods.

The Babylonians believed there were different gods controlling and reigning over everything – a god of the mountains, god of the sea, etc, and a god of Babylon. They would have believed that conquering Jerusalem proved that their god was more powerful than the God of Judah – the one true God. Evidence that their god was true while the God of Judah was false.

And think how the Jewish exiles must have felt when they saw some of the precious vessels used in the temple in Jerusalem to worship the Lord God, being taken to the temple to be used for idol worship in Babylon.

But note that the Lord, Almighty God, is in charge throughout. Verse 2, “the **Lord** delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand:”, verse 9 “Now **God** had caused the official to show favour and sympathy to Daniel”, verse 17, “To these four young men **God** gave knowledge and understanding of literature and learning and Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds: So the Lord is in control. He knows what he’s doing. Daniel and his friends are part of God’s plan and he has a special purpose for them.

Another element involved in their indoctrination was changing their names. Everything that reminded them of their origin had to be removed. The names their parents gave them had incorporated the Hebrew words for the God of Israel. But their new names incorporated the names of Babylonian deities. So, for example, Daniel’s name became Belteshazzar. The top god in Babylon at this time was called Bel and Daniel’s new name meant “Bel’s Prince.”

These new names must have been hard to cope with – they must have really grated because they implied allegiance to these false gods. As they underwent their intensive training and heard their new names called out day after day, year after year, it would have been very easy for them to begin thinking of themselves as citizens of Babylon rather than citizens of Jerusalem.

That was Nebuchadnezzar’s strategy – that they should begin thinking and acting like the Babylonians so they could be of maximum use and a therefore a wise investment.

I find it fascinating that, although we now know Daniel by his Jewish name, we tend to know the other three by their Babylonian names!

Changing names and titles is part of our culture and often reflects a significant change in our lives.

In Matthew 16 verse 18 Jesus gives Simon his new name Peter.

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church”.

Many women take their husband’s name when they marry and go from Miss to Mrs. Nuns change their name when they take their vows, indicating that they are leaving their old lives behind;

Julie’s title will change from Mrs to the Reverend when she’s ordained, hopefully on 11th October.

Daniel seems to be going along with all of this but then comes the point where he can no longer compromise

he draws the line

and that is his refusal to consume the king’s food and wine.

There are different theories as to why this was.

Was it because the meat wasn’t kosher?

Was it because the meat was first sacrificed to the Babylonian gods?

Was it because consuming the king’s rich food and wine confirmed that Daniel entirely belonged to King Nebuchadnezzar and was beholden to him?

Some think this is an example of the Bible’s preference for vegetarianism.

But I’m mindful that, for example, the Jews’ Exodus from Egypt hinged on the sacrifice of lambs.

In Acts chapter 10 when Peter has the vision of the sheet being lowered containing all kinds of animals, he hears God’s voice saying “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

If the king had known that Daniel was taking a stance, drawing the line, refusing to consume his best food and drink, Nebuchadnezzar could have been highly insulted, and given instructions for Daniel to be killed.

Daniel’s line drawing is subtle and appeases his own conscience.

He is not going to lose his Jewish identity.

He is not going to lose his allegiance to God.

He is not going to forget who he is.

I am very struck by these four young men’s resolve to stay true to God and we’ll see compelling examples during this sermon series.

It must have been tempting, and would be so much easier, to ignore their roots, their Jewish identity and allegiance to God and been absorbed into the Babylonian culture.

As I said earlier, they were young men, just teenagers, about the same age as our youngsters going off to university.

Isn’t it vital to teach our youngsters the truth of our faith so they can remain faithful to Jesus when they leave home and move on to work, college or university.

Nathan’s work with our youth group is so important, as is our work with children in Activ8, Messy Church, Footprints, etc.

And isn't it vital that we underpin all this work with prayer and continue to pray for our young people –
so we can help them know where they should draw the line –
so that they don't forget their relationship with our Lord Jesus and that he's there with them.

Peer pressure to conform to cultural values around us can be hard to resist, however old we are.

Our country, our culture, needs Christians to be influential in every aspect of life – and Daniel and his friends were to have great influence in Babylon as we shall see.

And it's so important, too, that we don't stay in our comfort zone of a holy huddle but get out there to try and bring Christian influence into every aspect of life, to make disciples of all nations, as Jesus told us to do in what we call the Great Commission. I encourage you to get involved in the prayer weekend next weekend which includes a prayer walk round our village, our community, as we Love Fetcham.

We need to gain strength from our holy huddle, from the support and prayer of fellow Christians, so we can take the light of Christ into the world with us.

We are told to be "in the world, not of the world".

I wonder, should our uni students distance themselves from the sometimes wild behaviour of the other students, for example in Freshers Week, or be there, say as Street Angels, to mop up and give assurance of God's forgiveness if their friends behave in a way they later regret.

As Christians we too are living in an alien culture. We too are in the minority.

As it says in Psalm 137 verse 4 "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?", a question we can all ask ourselves.

How do we remain connected to God?

I'd suggest it's really important that we keep praying and reading holy scripture.

And that we remain connected to each other, to other Christians, and I'm so aware of how difficult this can seem at the moment when we're unable to worship and sing together in the way we're used to and love in our church building.

I think many of us are feeling isolated – particularly isolated from each other when we are largely unable to meet in the usual way and many are declaring themselves zoomed out.

And although we may feel zoomed out, isn't it great that modern technology can at least help to keep us in touch, something for which we should thank God.

There is some wonderful work going on in our church family and beyond, keeping everybody connected and serving our community.

It's so important to stay in touch, particularly at the moment when we may feel isolated and vulnerable, especially with the changes that are coming.

Why not pick up the phone today, and every day come to that, and ring people to keep in touch and show our love and support, that we care as Jesus cares, especially if the Coronavirus situation gets worse again and more lockdown measures come into force.

One vital thing we can take from the book of Daniel is that our sovereign God is in control –

he was in control then and he still is now.

We too are singing a song in a strange land –

We, like Daniel and his friends, must remain faithful to God in our alien culture.

Remember that our Lord Jesus is with us and we must trust that Jesus is lord, even when, in our culture, in our land, it might not feel like it.

We, like Daniel and his friends, must keep our resolve to remain faithful to God.

And if, like Daniel, we're faced with a moral dilemma and don't know if we should compromise or the time has come to draw the line, I suggest we consult our

Christian friends and that, above all, we pray for God's help, wisdom and guidance.

Amen.