

## Sermon 11 October 2020 – DANIEL 6 – Iain Whitlam

*(as marked up with pauses and other punctuation for presentation)*

In our journey through the theatrical and enigmatic book of Daniel, we've had Corinne tell us about keeping faith in an alien culture – respecting Jewish food practices (in Daniel 1). Brigitte addressed worshipping the true God – in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3). Last week, Roger looked at God's dealing with earthly rule – the writing on the wall for Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 5). Today we realise what Andrew has billed as 'opposition vanquished' – in the lions' den (Daniel 6).

The story of Daniel in the lions' den is quite likely to be something you remember from childhood. Even if not, I want to try a fresh take on a what for many is a familiar tale. One way to study the Bible is Ignatian reflection, where we place ourself in the role of one of the characters in the story. I ask you to follow me through the story from the vantage point of Darius the Mede.

First I'll use a couple of verses of Psalm 137 (vv4, 5) as a prayer:

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.

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Imagine yourself as Darius the Mede: We Persians and Medes have taken charge of Babylon. One of the first things I've done is to reorganise the country. We're in charge now, but we largely take the country as we find it. We've inherited the courtiers from Belshazzar, ... whom we deposed, ... and put them charge of the new districts that I've set up, each overseen by a satrap. One of those we have inherited is a man named Daniel – brought here from Jerusalem when the Nebuchadnezzar took over Judah. Daniel has impressed me as a man of integrity. He's adapted well to Babylonian life. I've put him in charge over these satraps and governors. He has a reputation for interpreting dreams – I gather he saw the writing on the wall for Nebuchadnezzar.

The satraps and governors came to me keen on law and order. That sounds good for a healthy administration. It makes for uncomplicated rules. We'll not be having any lawless and permissive behaviour here. This avoids any of these ambiguous government declarations that no-one can understand. They had no difficulty persuading me to sign an edict this effect: I'm in charge here – everyone bows down to me. Break this edict and you're for the lions.

... Then things got complicated. ... Unintended consequences crept in. The satraps and governors found Daniel quite overtly kneeling, praying to and praising his God. They were straight back to me to invoke the penalty for disobeying the edict. ... The penny dropped – this was all a set up. ‘Everyone agrees’, they claimed – but all along they had plotted this to set a trap for Daniel – ... and for me. They are jealous of this Judaeen. He’s so dependable they can’t find anything to fault him, so they’ve played on his devotion to God.

I spent the afternoon thinking how to get out of this dilemma. I can’t change my mind – that looks weak. No mercy, no exceptions: law and order must prevail. But I don’t want to give in to these manipulating conspirators. They’ve duped me. I’m loath to lose a first-class administrator. I have found him most trustworthy and hold him in high regard. He’s not disloyal. ... What do they think I am – a god? ... On reflection, that amounts to what they’ve made of me, to achieve their evil ends. ... It sounded such a good law – ... not so good now. And Daniel was quite aware of the edict, yet was as determined as ever – no compromising: he trusts in this God of Israel no matter what society and Babel around him thinks.

No good, I had to carry out the edict and throw Daniel into the lions' den. To make sure no-one interfered, I sealed the stone at the entrance to the den, first wishing Daniel be delivered by this God he worships. I said this in hope rather than believing it. ... I couldn't sleep all night, ... lost my appetite. There is something about Daniel – I can't get my head round it – something (someone?) that drives him beyond fear of anything I can throw at him.

This morning, I went down to the den, ... hesitantly calling to see if the God whom Daniel serves has been able to deliver him. I don't know what made me think this was ever a possibility. ... And, lo and behold, he replied – loyal as ever, saying an angel of this God was sent to save him because he had done me no wrong.

I was so pleased – we had him taken out of the den: not a scratch on him. Indeed, his trust in God is unflagging. In the thick of political and daily life, no human barriers can overwhelm this God. Daniel was more persevering than any edict I might issue. He's got faith ... I think I need such faith too.

As for those jealous accusing satraps and governors, they are guilty of giving false witness. Those lions made mincemeat of them when we sent them in the den in Daniel's place. Bother unalterable human edicts. This God is something beyond anything even kings can order. Makes you reflect: Who really runs this world?

There's something contagious in Daniel's faith. I issued a new decree. People should tremble and fear before this God. ... Like Daniel, I've found myself turning to prayer:

He is the living God, enduring forever.

His kingdom shall not be destroyed, and his dominion has no end.

He delivers and rescues, he works signs of wonders in heaven and on earth.

For he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions. Amen.

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By way of postscript, Lucas, in his commentary, encourages us to live by the story, ... rather than get bogged down by the specifics in the story. And that is as true for us as Christians today, where we our faith may not feel at home in a secular country; a world that looks predominantly to human values. Surrounded by a Covid-19 pandemic, ... poverty, ... wars, ... exploitation of the planet and self-centred

ambition, we too are challenged to stand against false witness and resolutely pursue faith in God. Like Daniel, we are not saved from the threats of fake news, lying, scheming, modern-day power-hungry 'lions', but kept safe in God's presence, even living among such threats.

What do we today take away from this story?

Do we dare to be like Daniel and believe in God with authority over creation?

Are we fervent in our daily prayer, resisting the temptations of living in a post-Christian society, not bowing down to society's false gods?

Do we trust in God – whose loving 'law' is immutable, unlike earthly rulers – and endure to the end that we might be saved?

Recapping: dare to believe in God; be fervent in prayer; trust in God and be saved.

I leave you with a prayer (*2 Tim 3 adapted*).

O heavenly Father, by whose inspiration all holy Scripture has been written for our instruction: Grant that your Word may be useful for teaching and training us in righteousness; that we may be wise for salvation through faith, and equipped for every good work.