

Sunday 3rd January 2021

Daniel 1:1-21 (Courage not to compromise)

Talk by Andrew Griffiths, Prayers by Julian Providence

Welcome

Hi, my name is Andrew and thanks for downloading the talk for St John's church for Sunday 3 January 2021. I will be reading from Daniel 1, giving a short talk and then Julian will be leading our prayers, before we end.

This is the first Sunday of 2021 – surely a year which we approach with hope.

Hope that the pandemic will end, and hope that we will be able, once again, to do the things that come most naturally to us – meeting up to talk, laugh and share, and to come once again together in person to sing and worship in church.

We have hope, but we also know that it is a difficult time – this morning we are starting a series on Daniel, looking at trusting God in trying times.

Because we know that whatever the world throws at us, we can trust in our loving and saving Lord.

Reading: Daniel 1 - Daniel's training in Babylon

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. **2** And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia^[a] and put in the treasure-house of his god.

3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility – **4** young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.^[b] **5** The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

6 Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. **7** The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself in this way. **9** Now God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel, **10** but the official told Daniel, 'I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your^[c] food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men of your age? The king would then have my head because of you.'

¹¹ Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹² 'Please test your servants for ten days: give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.' ¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵ At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. ¹⁶ So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

¹⁸ At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanterers in his whole kingdom.

²¹ And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Talk

Today we're starting a new series looking at the book of Daniel. We're doing this series in parallel with Holy Trinity, so we can start thinking through the same themes and discussing how God is looking to shape us as we combine forces for His mission.

Daniel is an interesting and challenging book. And not just because of the many difficult to pronounce names but because it feels simple at points – for example in our passage this morning – but impenetrable in other parts. It includes some of the most well-known Bible stories, like Daniel and the Lions' Den and Shadrach Meshach and Abednego surviving the furnace. But it also includes Daniel's sometimes complex and confusing visions. It is important as we look at Daniel to bare two things in mind.

First, it is not meant to be read as a simple history – it does not just tell you what happened and leave you to interpret it. Rather, it provides a framework and a process for thinking about some important and difficult things – just as the exiles to Babylon, that we read about in our passage this morning, had to face challenging times.

Secondly, and related, Daniel is the archetypal apocalyptic book. This was something I preached about on the first Sunday of Advent, but as a reminder: apocalyptic writing is not about the destruction of the world – that is how we have changed the original word.

The original meaning of apocalyptic writing was that it revealed the power of God – it was about revealing that underneath the actions of people, the movement of time, and the forces of nature, God is powerfully in charge. Daniel is about that – it is about the power of God being revealed in a difficult and challenging set of circumstances. Apocalyptic writing is

a genre all on its own, with its own rules, conventions, and language. If you try to read it as history, or take some of it at face value, you will misunderstand it. Always approach apocalyptic writing with the question: 'what does this reveal to me about the power and nature of God?' and not questions about whether this predicts the future, for example.

So, let us avoid simple interpretations of the stories of Daniel, because that is not what it was written for, but instead focus on understanding what is each part of Daniel trying to tell us about the revelation of God's power. The book of Daniel is also important for another reason, and this relates really well with the main message in our passage. It is important because it marks the beginning of the third stage of God revealing himself to the people of Israel.

In the beginning, up to the time of Moses, God revealed himself to a family, a tribe, a migrant people, often through a direct and powerful relationship with one person – through Abraham, Jacob, etc. This tribe of people moved to Egypt and ended up enslaved, until God freed them, and Moses led them to the promised land. That is when the second stage began – when God revealed himself to a nation, Israel, rooted in a specific place, and present in the physical location of the temple.

King David and King Solomon – they oversaw the greatest times for the Kingdom of Israel. God was God of the people rooted in the location of Israel, and particularly in the Temple of Jerusalem. And then came the exile – we read about it here.

Nebuchadnezzar arrived from Babylon and conquered Israel. He took the temple down and took its treasures with him back to his capital city. He took the young leading people from the physical location and he uprooted the whole of Israel. This was a catastrophic disaster for the people – they were no longer in the place where they believed God to reside. Their beliefs in a God who was the specific God of their people and their place were shattered by the destruction of that place and the scattering of that people.

But despite the turmoil and struggle, this was the beginning of the third, and probably most important stage of God's revelation to the people of Israel. Because it was the revelation that God was and is the God of everywhere, not just one of many in the land of Israel. The convention of the time was that when one nation defeated another, it represented the defeat of that nation's gods as well – it showed they lacked power.

So, the expectation was that when Nebuchadnezzar took these young men captive, having destroyed their nation, that they would recognise the Babylonian gods had defeated the Israelite God. But instead, God revealed Himself through the exile to be God of Babylon as well – powerful beyond the false gods of the most powerful nation. God revealed to Daniel and others that no military defeat in Israel could defeat Him – His power transcended the building of the temple in Jerusalem or the collection of His people in one country.

Our passage this morning tells of these four young men, taken into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar's army. They were taken to be servants to the King, and to serve in his palace – they were taken because they were the ruling class of Israel, and King

Nebuchadnezzar wanted these men there to show how powerful he was. He was served by the rulers of other nations.

The idea was that these young men would take on the Babylonian culture, be given Babylonian names, live in the King's palace, eat his food and become good Babylonians – they would be the symbol of the complete victory of Babylon over Israel. And this is where Daniel's act of faithfulness comes in – where he asks to be allowed to avoid foods that God, his ancestral God from Israel, did not allow. Everyone expected Daniel to believe and accept that his God had been defeated.

But Daniel recognised that his God, was in fact *the* God. This is the start of the third stage of God's revelation – that the God of Israel, is in fact the God of all. It was no matter that they now lived in a different place, were given different names and had been militarily defeated. None of that made any difference to the reality of God's power. The exile, and the removal of these men to Babylon, rather than destroying God, revealed God's power over all people and all nations.

We read in verses 15 and 16 of Daniel 1, that God blessed Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, because they had remained faithful to Him, despite what the world was telling them. They were healthier and recognised as wise, more so than all the other people around them. God had given them a mission – to show, to reveal, that He was God over Babylon, as well as Israel. That He was more powerful than any of the gods of Babylon or Persia – the mightiest nations on earth.

Daniel is apocalyptic writing because it is about the revelation of God's power over all the earth. And Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, were faithful despite the whole world telling them that their God was no longer relevant and had been defeated. Things must have felt pretty scary and strange, taken from their families and their land, given different names and expected to live in a different culture. But they remained faithful, and in doing so they revealed the power of God over all the earth.

We can surely feel like this at times – we live in strange times, where it feels like what we normally rely on is more crumbly than we thought possible. As 2021 begins, many people look back on a difficult year with sadness. We've just had a Christmas where most of us didn't see families, where we did not meet as a church to sing carols together, and where many of our rituals and culture seem to be faded. We can feel like the certainties of old are not quite as certain as we once thought they were.

In many countries Christians are persecuted for their faith, told that their God is not relevant and that they should abandon Him. In times like this, the central message of Daniel is clearly for us. Wherever we are, whatever situation we find ourselves in, God is there, and He is God of all. We are called to be faithful to God, because as with Daniel, God is so often revealed to those around us by our faith in difficult times.

In fact, the ultimate revelation of God, through the life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, shows how even in apparent defeat God triumphs – and He triumphs because He shows us who He truly is, a loving, caring and sacrificial God, the God of all.

Let us pray

Lord of yesterday, today and tomorrow,
we gather here this first Sunday of the New Year,
in a mixture of hope, anticipation, fear, excitement, and expectation.
We do not know what the year holds for us.
there are things we are afraid of:
worries about health and family, job security and finances.
There is much we hope for:
weddings or anniversaries or baptisms,
holidays to enjoy,
friends to meet once again and laugh with
Our church family gathering in person once more.

Lord God,
the coming year is full of uncertainty and hope.
Whatever the year holds for us, though,
we trust You, and we place every day of this year in your care
knowing that, as in the past, You are with us,
caring for us with constant love.

And so, Lord, we place ourselves into your keeping
and dedicate our lives to your service
through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour.
Amen.

Prayers

And now Julian will continue in our prayers.

Let us pray.

"Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits — who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." (Psalm 103)

In a year past that has been so difficult and painful and exhausting for so many of us, the people we know and our world, we thank you that you have remained with us every second of this challenging year. Faithful God you have kept your promise: never will I leave you, never will I forsake you (Hebrews 13:5).

Lord we reflect over the past year on the losses we have experienced - the death of family and those dear to us, illness and ongoing struggles with health, struggles as carers for loved ones or children, isolation, loneliness and fears for the future and our security. Lord, you did not take us out of the world but promised to walk with us through it.

Lord you know our struggles and our frailties we know that you love us because as we celebrated over Christmas, you came to us as a tiny helpless child - the Lord who shared all the sorrows and joys of life in this world and yet overcame the world, shining your light into our darkness, speaking your truth into our chaos, exchanging our weakness for your power and your death for our eternal life.

Lord in this coming year help us to share the light of your love and hope and salvation and to comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received.

We thank you for so many of your good gifts to us the St John's family over the past year - for sustaining us through loss and ill health and isolation, for holding us together as a church as we continue to meet remotely, for sustaining St Johns outreach through CAP, Amaze Penge and Foodbank, for sustaining us financially and the great blessing of money given for our boiler, for providing for a marriage at St John's even at the height of the pandemic, for the safe birth of children.

Lord whatever you've brought us through or however you've been at work in our lives the year past we thank you. Take a moment to bring to mind some way God has been with you over the past year, to remember his love and faithfulness to us.....

Continue to be with us Lord through this coming year and whatever joys or hardships we might face may they only drive us closer to you. Please continue to bring hope and healing for those of us still struggling and through your Holy Spirit Lord would you continue to bind us together as your people, prompting us to care and look after one another.

Thank you for the gift of the ingenuity of the human mind and for the discipline of science that at the end of the year hope was brought to us in the form of a vaccine. We do pray for the rollout of the vaccine across our nation and our world. Lord we ask that you will safeguard this process in our nation help our government to plan in a way that will get the vaccine out to as many people as possible as quickly as possible, particularly the most vulnerable and help them to use resources wisely.

We ask again Lord in your mercy for your hand to stay the spread of the virus rising in so many nations. Jesus you are still Lord over this world and just like you spoke and quieted the storm will you speak your word into this world to limit the spread of the virus.

We remember before you our health services currently under so much strain. Would you supernaturally sustain the staff, the hospitals, ambulance services and all our other medical services and help us stem the tide of the virus before our health system collapses.

We pray for all school children who are not now returning their schools next week. We pray for our young people in our St John's family and we pray for the teachers in our St John's family too. Please be with them and help both through this difficult time of teaching and learning. Enable them to learn and teach as best they can. We thank you for the teachers in our St John's family too. Would you sustain them and inspire them to be able to innovate and adapt to achieve all they need to. We also pray for St John's school that you would be with the staff and pupils there. Lord by your Holy Spirit and in practical ways would you resource that school and keep teachers and pupils safe. Please help those families who might be struggling with childcare or generally from the pressures of the pandemic. Please will you bring them to the attention of those who can help them.

We pray for the future of young people across our nation, at school or university. Holy Spirit we ask that you would bring young lives through the pandemic and restore to them as much as possible the losses of time, opportunity and education that they will have missed out on. Please give our government the vision and compassion in caring for and restoring young lives and to give them all the resources and the future they will need.

We pray for our church family in need.

We lift Nigel and Sarah's son Tim to you. Please lay your healing hand on him and please provide him the treatment he needs. We pray for Nigel and Sarah and Tim's family that you would be present with them through this anxious time.

We also lift Nigel and Sarah's son Jon and his family Lucy and Catlin who have had positive tests. Please heal them quickly and shield them from the worst of the illness.

We pray for Emma's son and daughter. We pray your protection over them both that the illness would subside quickly and cause no lasting harm. Again please be present with Emma and the family after such a hard year for them.

We pray for your healing touch to be on Andy enable him to leave hospital very soon.

We pray for Yvette's son Zak that you would keep watch over his health and give Yvette your strength.

We lift all of us who have needs before you and all who there has not been time to mention today. You know us all by name thank you that you love us and are with us in whatever is happening in our lives.

Finally, Lord, we pray over St John's and Holy Trinity for the year ahead. Though you are not limited by the beginnings and ends of years, please come Holy Spirit and use this time to refresh our hearts and minds, give us renewed vision, inspiration and unity and we look forward to your Name being glorified across Penge and beyond as you use us to build your Kingdom and bring a new leader and a new era for both our churches.

And in unity we pray...

Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name
Your kingdom come
Your will be done on earth as in heaven
Give us today our daily bread
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil
For the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Thank you, Julian, and thank you for listening.

God bless.