

Delusions of grandeur: Daniel ch.4



Daniel ch.4

Revelation ch.5

O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: The kingdom has departed from you! You shall be driven away from human society, and your dwelling shall be with the animals of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like the oxen, until you have learnt that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will. Daniel 4.31-32

The most important leader in the world, obsessed with his own image, desperate to impose his warped agenda on the vast and varied populations of his empire — suddenly humiliated, cast out, blundering about the fields like a disgruntled beast. You don't have to look very far to find some uncanny resonances between the book of Daniel and the politics of the past week. (You couldn't make it up!)

If you flip back through Nebuchadnezzar chapters 1, 2 and 3 (it's a good

lockdown read!) you'll find how the whole story of Nebuchadnezzar fits together. It starts in chapter 1 with a resounding success. The king of Babylon lays siege to Jerusalem, the holy city, defended and protected by the God of Israel — and he wins! He storms the walls, defeats the king, captures a load of prisoners — and all the fabled wealth of the temple in Jerusalem. No wonder he goes back to Babylon to gloat, the all-conquering hero taking control of a new world empire. What he doesn't know is that his new-found success is not down to his own abilities: it's a gift, the product of forces outside his control: *The Lord let King Jehoiakin of Judah fall into his power* (1.2).

What he also doesn't know is that hidden in his baggage train of captured booty is a tiny seed of resistance that will bring him face-to-face with the limitations of his power. Daniel and his three friends, bright young sixth-formers from the defeated kingdom of Judah, are taken to Babylon to be retrained for the Babylonian civil service. They don't have a choice: in fact part of the tension in the story is Daniel's challenge of learning to live with exile, adjusting to the traumatic experience of being uprooted from a secure, familiar world of home and city and temple into a world fallen apart, a world controlled by alien empires and power-plays that care nothing for the little nations and their gods.

Surprisingly, what Daniel discovers in exile is that this alien world is still God's world: that the God of Israel is the God of the whole world, the God whose kingship the empires of the world must acknowledge — that, despite all appearances to the contrary, God is still on the throne. It begins with a tiny act of resistance (ch.1), when Daniel and his friends refuse to eat the rich food set before them by the palace officials and choose a vegetarian diet instead. To Daniel, this is a matter of obedience to God — they don't want to eat something that would compromise their loyalty to God's law. To

the officials, it's a basic question — who's in charge here? All the power that's visible in this scenario belongs to the king: why would anybody choose to risk their career for a phantom loyalty to an invisible and defeated God?

So it's precisely in the experience of exile that Daniel and his friends learn to trust this invisible and defeated God, this vulnerable God, over against the very visible and apparently invulnerable power-structures of the world they live in. Little things first: it turns out the Jewish boys look better and healthier on their vegetable diet than the other boys who've been eating Nebuchadnezzar's hamburgers and chips (1.15). Then a scarier test in ch.2: Nebuchadnezzar consults Daniel about a dream he can't even remember, so Daniel asks his friends to pray for him (2.17-18) and then has to trust to God's wisdom to reveal the dream and its meaning. And that's about power, too: it's a dream about the transfer of power, about a great golden image of absolute power undermined by the instability of its feet of clay (2.42).

Nebuchadnezzar is beginning to get the message: "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery!" (2.47). But that doesn't stop him building a great golden monument to himself and his own power in ch.3, and demanding that everybody in his enormous empire bow down to it and worship it. That's the occasion for the famous burning fiery furnace, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego choosing to defy the king — the one with the visible power — out of loyalty to their invisible, vulnerable God, whether or not he is able to save them: "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace and from your hand, O king, let him deliver us; *but if not*, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden image that you have set up"

(3.17-18).

So it's not till ch.4 that Nebuchadnezzar finally gets the message. The ultimate humiliation for absolute power is losing control over oneself, losing the basic human ability to function as a rational autonomous human being — like poor old King George III. Something like that seems to have happened to Nebuchadnezzar —and once again he calls Daniel in to interpret his dream and reassure him that God is on his side. God does care for the old autocrat, like he cares for all humanity — but he has to learn that exercising power over other people is not a reward but a responsibility, a trust from God to be exercised in humility and justice.

God is not against the exercise of power *per se*. God once called Nebuchadnezzar his servant (Jeremiah 25.8-11) — just as St Paul once called the Roman emperor Nero “God’s minister for your good” (Romans 13.3). But Nebuchadnezzar has to learn that all power belongs to God — authority is given by God, to be exercised responsibly on his behalf, and it can just as easily be taken away.

It's no coincidence that the other reading for today's Morning Prayer comes from the book of Revelation (ch.5). Revelation, like Daniel, is centred on a great vision of the throne of God, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the one who is, and was, and is to come — a great reassertion of the kingship of God, written at a time when the churches were experiencing “tribulation” and “patient endurance” (Rev 1.9). The emotional centre of John's vision is in chs 4 and 5, with the worship of heaven around the throne of God. But what kind of kingship is God's kingship? It's easy to fall into the trap of constructing our vision of God on the basis of the flawed and fallible power-structures we know on earth — the same, only more so. But take another look at what John *hears*, and what he *sees*. He *hears* of

the “Lion of the tribe of Judah”, a vision of conquering might (5.5). But what he sees is something much more vulnerable: *I saw in the midst of the throne a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered* (5.6). God’s power is not only a different source of power. It’s a different kind of power: the power of suffering love.

Almighty Father,

Whose will is to restore all things in your beloved Son, the King of all:

Govern the hearts and minds of those in authority,

And bring the families of the nations, divided and torn apart by the ravages of sin,

To be subject to his just and gentle rule;

Who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

One God, now and for ever, Amen.

God bless,

Loveday

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