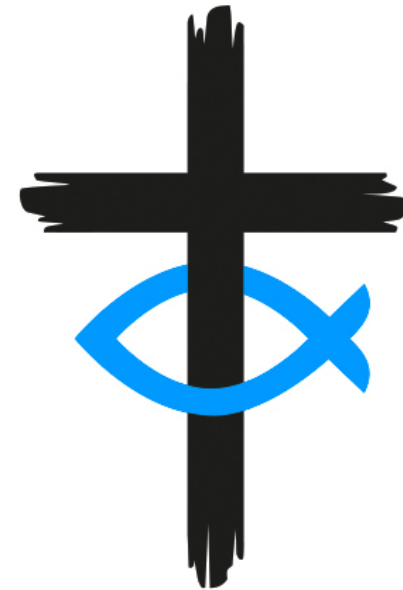


You saw a tree grown great and strong...  
its foliage was beautiful and fruit abundant,  
under which animals of the field lived,  
in whose branches the birds had nests.  
And you said "Cut down the tree for development."  
And you did. And the earth could not survive.  
So now you too will be chopped down unless you learn quickly that  
Heaven is sovereign.  
And did the people say: Amen?

**Daily Devotions from the URC**  
**The Book of Daniel (1)**



*Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July – Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> July*

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### Introduction

Daniel is an interesting yet, in places, difficult book comprising of two very different sections. The first 6 chapters, attributed to an anonymous narrator, are the ones we are most familiar with and comprise of court legends about Daniel and his friends who had to find ways to live with persecution and powerful (yet rather bumbling) monarchs. The second section, written as visions of Daniel, dates from the second Century BC when the Greeks were threatening Israel. This section is rather more difficult as the style of writing is apocalyptic with mysterious visions portraying the End Times. Daniel is the first book to reflect on themes of resurrection and reward/punishment in the after life. Radical Christian groups - at the Reformation and during the Civil

### Reflection

What it is to be a prophet of doom! What might it be like to tell someone to their face that their days are numbered, that their pride and greed have caught up with them, that they will be cut down unless they change their ways imminently? Can we imagine what that is like?

What it is to be the recipient of prophecy! What might it be like to hear that our way of life has eaten us up, that we have but a short time to avoid a terrible fate? Can we imagine what that is like?

Well, actually we can. Like Nebuchadnezzar, we have benefited from a sumptuous way of life bought at others' expense. We have consumed the earth's resources like there is no tomorrow. We have assumed that our (economic) power will go on forever. And, like Nebuchadnezzar, we are wrong. We are morally wrong – we should care about our suffering world. We are factually wrong – our greed will catch up with us.

We could be Daniel. You and I could – should – write today to our MP and our local council asking them to support declaring a climate emergency and acting quickly to save our world. You and I could – should – engage in prophetic action through Christian Climate Action (part of Extinction Rebellion) to show those in power the dire warnings of God, spoken through the best scientific minds of our age.

Whether or not we are prepared to be Daniel, we are King Nebuchadnezzar. Our time is up. As we shall see tomorrow, Nebuchadnezzar had just a year to change – and he failed to listen. The International Panel on Climate Change has given us twelve years (one of which has gone). Will we listen?

Saturday 27th July

The Rev'd Gethin Rhys, Policy Officer of Cytun (Churches Together in Wales), member of Parkminster URC, Cardiff

Reading: Daniel 4: 19 - 27

Then Daniel, who was called Beltshazzar, was severely distressed for a while. His thoughts terrified him. The king said, 'Beltshazzar, do not let the dream or the interpretation terrify you.' Beltshazzar answered, 'My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you, and its interpretation for your enemies! The tree that you saw, which grew great and strong, so that its top reached to heaven and was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, and which provided food for all, under which animals of the field lived, and in whose branches the birds of the air had nests— it is you, O king! You have grown great and strong. Your greatness has increased and reaches to heaven, and your sovereignty to the ends of the earth. And whereas the king saw a holy watcher coming down from heaven and saying, "Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave its stump and roots in the ground, with a band of iron and bronze, in the grass of the field; and let him be bathed with the dew of heaven, and let his lot be with the animals of the field, until seven times pass over him"— this is the interpretation, O king, and it is a decree of the Most High that has come upon my lord the king: You shall be driven away from human society, and your dwelling shall be with the wild animals. You shall be made to eat grass like oxen, you shall be bathed with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you, until you have learned that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals, and gives it to whom he will. As it was commanded to leave the stump and roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be re-established for you from the time that you learn that Heaven is sovereign. Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged.'

War used Daniel to push for a government of the saints as a precursor to Jesus' return (Cromwell turned down this kind offer). The passages are rather longer than when dealing with, say, an Epistle partly as some are stories and partly as apocalyptic sections don't easily break down into smaller chunks.

Sunday 14th July Psalm 105 1 - 19

The Rev'd Viv Henderson, Minister of Minehead URC

1 Give thanks to the LORD God  
and call on his name;  
His wonderful deeds  
to the nations proclaim.  
2 Sing praises to him,  
and his exploits record;  
3 Let all those who seek him  
rejoice in the LORD.

4 You chosen ones,  
look to the LORD and his might;  
5 Seek ever his face,  
and his wonders recite,  
His miracles too,  
and his judgments divine—  
6 You children of Abraham,  
Jacob's own line.

7 The LORD is our God,  
and he rules all the earth.  
8 Rememb'ring his cov'nant—  
the word he set forth—  
He vowed, for the ages to come,  
to make good  
9 His promise to Abr'ham,  
to Isaac renewed.

10 To Jacob his sov'reign decree  
was made sure;  
With Isr'el his cov'nant  
would always endure:  
11 "To you I will give, as your  
portion to stand,  
The country of Canaan,  
the beautiful land."

12 When they were no more  
than a wandering few,  
In number restricted,  
and foreigners too,  
13 From nation to nation  
they travelled around;  
Wherever they wandered,  
no rest could be found.

14 He would not permit  
that his folk be oppressed;  
For his chosen ones' sake  
mighty kings he addressed:  
15 "Touch not my anointed  
—to me they belong;  
Respect my own prophets  
and do them no wrong."

16 The LORD called down famine  
upon the whole land;  
Their food was destroyed  
at his sovereign command.

17 But he sent beforehand,  
his people to save,  
His chosen one, Joseph,  
sold off as a slave.

18 His feet within shackles of  
bronze were confined,  
His neck put in irons; for  
freedom he pined.

19 The word of the LORD was a  
test to be passed  
Till what he foretold was  
accomplished at last.

### Reflection

This is part of a long Psalm which recounts God's covenant with his people, their rescue from Egypt and provision in the wilderness and before arriving in the Promised Land. It runs to 45 verses and summarises much of the Exodus journey of God's people; a story which would be recounted at Passover. It is worth reading in full.

It is telling the people to remember their story. It started with promises to Abraham, and ended (in this Psalm) when they came to their own country.

It is a Psalm reminding us that God promises, protects and provides. It begins with the call to give thanks which some scholars think was added later.

These opening five verses remind me of an old chorus:

O give thanks to the Lord for He is good, all you His people,  
O give thanks to the Lord for He is good.  
Let us praise, let us thank,  
Let us celebrate and dance,  
O give thanks to the Lord for He is good.

Our churches, the world in which we live and move and have our being, need problem-solvers, not more problems. Within our congregation we have people who like to cause us all sorts of trouble because they don't get what it means to be a disciple of Jesus: 'How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing Good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil' Acts 10:38

'I dreamed a dream' and the King looks to Daniel, who will bring hope in a very grim situation.

So, problem solver Daniel: 'Bring it on!'

Prayer:

Gracious God,  
kick us out of bed today  
with a wake-up call to action.

When we meet problems, give us wisdom to resolve them.

When we meet any facing grim and difficult situations today,  
enable us to support them.

May any who feel that 'life has killed the dream they dreamed'  
encounter something of the love of God  
through us.

'Through our lives and by our prayers your kingdom come' (R&S 401)  
.Amen

The sentence is rendered by decree of the watchers,  
the decision is given by order of the holy ones,  
in order that all who live may know  
that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdom of mortals;  
he gives it to whom he will  
and sets over it the lowliest of human beings.”

‘This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw. Now you, Belteshazzar, declare the interpretation, since all the wise men of my kingdom are unable to tell me the interpretation. You are able, however, for you are endowed with a spirit of the holy gods.’

### Reflection

10 years ago Susan Boyle, unemployed and wanting to become a professional singer, walked out on the stage for the auditions of ‘Britain’s Got Talent’ and sung ‘I Dreamed a Dream’ from Les Miserables that was to change her life. Ant and Dec, who hosted the show, pointed at the screen: ‘You didn’t expect that, did you?’ The audience and the judges had written her off. Amanda Holden said, ‘That was the biggest wake-up call EVER!’

Those words: ‘I had a dream my life would be different from this hell I’m living. So different not from what it seemed now life has killed the dream I dreamed’ describes a situation from Victor Hugo’s novel based on the story of the have and have nots in 19th Century France. In our text Nebuchadnezzar describes his kingdom as one that is enjoying peace [shalom] and prosperity. No wonder! He had conquered Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, Egypt and Arabia and had accumulated enough wealth to make Babylon one of the most fabulous cities of the ancient world.

And yet living a life of luxury he had a dream that made him afraid. He looks to his scribe Belteshazzar (Daniel) for explanation. ‘No mystery is too difficult for you’ to bring about understanding and meaning.

We are reminded to keep searching for God, even if life is less than wonderful at the moment. We are encouraged to keep thanking him for what He has already done and later in verse 45 to keep following God's principles and obey his laws.

Lively worship will keep our spirits up and help to look expectantly for the fulfilment of God's promises and the blessings of his goodness wherever we find ourselves on our journey with God.

### Prayer

Help us to count your blessings to us Lord  
and offer grateful thanks  
for your mercy in times of trouble  
and your abundant provision in times of plenty.  
Keep us in step with you Lord  
and help us to remember your grace and tell our story  
faithful and ever loving God.  
Amen.

[Monday 15th July](#)

The Rev’d Richard Church, DGS(Discipleship) Member of Streatham URC

Reading: Daniel 1: 1-7

In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God. These he brought to the land of Shinar,[a] and placed the vessels in the treasury of his gods. Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the

king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court.

Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

## Reflection

As we begin to look at the Book of Daniel, we are confronted with one of the symptoms of Empire - namely an attempt to eradicate the cultural, political, and religious identity of the colonised. Three of these observant Jews experienced a change of name. Hananiah - the Hebrew means 'Yahweh is gracious' - became Shadrach 'Command of Aku' (Aku was the moon god). Mishael ('Who is like God') becomes Meshach 'Who is like Aku' and Azariah ('Yahweh has helped') became Abednego (Slave of the god Nebo).

We are told that they were to be fed as members of the royal household and educated for three years so that they could 'graduate' into the king's court, having been instructed in Babylonian customs and manners. In the coming days the narrative will focus on Daniel as the non-conforming hero but for now let's think a little further about the effect of Empire on the identity of those under its sway.

Empire has had a 'grooming' effect on those it seeks to subjugate. The Council for World Mission (CWM) uses the terminology of Empire to indicate the 'coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today which serves, protects and defends the interest of powerful corporations, elites and privileged people. The Babylonian Empire was not benign, hence the need to change the names and religion of these young Jewish leaders. CWM reminds us that we also are subject to a colonising influence.

told him the dream: 'O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that you are endowed with a spirit of the holy gods and that no mystery is too difficult for you. Hear the dream that I saw; tell me its interpretation.

Upon my bed this is what I saw;

there was a tree at the centre of the earth,  
and its height was great.

The tree grew great and strong,

its top reached to heaven,

and it was visible to the ends of the whole earth.

Its foliage was beautiful,

its fruit abundant,

and it provided food for all.

The animals of the field found shade under it,

the birds of the air nested in its branches,

and from it all living beings were fed.

'I continued looking, in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and there was a holy watcher, coming down from heaven. He cried aloud and said:

"Cut down the tree and chop off its branches,  
strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit.

Let the animals flee from beneath it

and the birds from its branches.

But leave its stump and roots in the ground,

with a band of iron and bronze,

in the tender grass of the field.

Let him be bathed with the dew of heaven,

and let his lot be with the animals of the field

in the grass of the earth.

Let his mind be changed from that of a human,

and let the mind of an animal be given to him.

And let seven times pass over him.

Catholic or Protestant. We do well to remember - but Shadrach's watch tells me it nearly 10pm; time to stop reflecting and start praying:

Almighty God teach us not to be afraid.

Remind us that you have redeemed us  
and called us by name, and we are yours.

When we pass through the waters, you will be with us; when we walk through the fire, the flame will not consume us, for you are the Lord our God, the Holy One of Israel, and our saviour. Amen

Friday 26th July

The Rev'd Andrew Royal Minister Maidstone & Staplehurst

Reading: Daniel 4: 1 - 18

King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages that live throughout the earth: May you have abundant prosperity! The signs and wonders that the Most High God has worked for me I am pleased to recount.

How great are his signs,

how mighty his wonders!

His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,

and his sovereignty is from generation to generation.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was living at ease in my home and prospering in my palace. I saw a dream that frightened me; my fantasies in bed and the visions of my head terrified me. So I made a decree that all the wise men of Babylon should be brought before me, in order that they might tell me the interpretation of the dream. Then the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the diviners came in, and I told them the dream, but they could not tell me its interpretation. At last Daniel came in before me—he who was named Beltshazzar after the name of my god, and who is endowed with a spirit of the holy gods—and I

When Bishop Lesslie Newbigin was asked what would it mean if the Gospel of Christ was allowed to critique western culture, he answered, 'Suffering.'

Lord Jesus, help me to preserve my identity in you,  
deliver me from being a consumer, a service user, a customer.  
You have given yourself to us all, that we may bear your likeness.  
Enable us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds  
so that we may discern what is truly valuable,  
what is good and acceptable and perfect, Amen

Tuesday 16th July

The Rev'd William Young, Minister, Essenside URC Glasgow and  
Morison Memorial URC Clydebank

Reading: Daniel 1: 8 - 17

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. Now God allowed Daniel to receive favour and compassion from the palace master. The palace master said to Daniel, 'I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king.' Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: 'Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe.' So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations. So the guard continued to withdraw their

royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.

## Reflection

Daniel is about living in Empire, not how to survive it. How does one work, eat, and create faithfully? Do you yield to the stimuli around you, or do you uphold the finest and most profound foundations of your belief?

Today's reading is a lesson about appearances. Daniel and the others are in the palace because they are gifted; the result of the Empire's assumptions of what makes a model subject (1:4). The powers that be didn't realise that they are not just pretty faces. Their model giftedness comes with a moral courage that makes them prophetic vessels of the remnant, not educated puppets of the emperor. The powers that be are too slow to understand now, but they soon will.

The 'palace master' was equivalent to what was known, in the antebellum era of North American slave plantations, as the house slave or house "negro". Hierarchically he kept the other slaves in check and was the one channel between the master and the slaves. Yet he, and his guards, were slaves as much as the others - with very limited power.

It is with them that Daniel's spiritual genius begins to take shape in these verses, as he is able to make an agreement with the palace guard to allow them to eat as vegetarians, inviting them to compare their appearance with those who ate the royal food. Even the Emperor of Babylon cannot mistake the benefits. Even in Empire, compassion can reveal itself if we live faithfully and not merely as survivors.

any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.' Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

## Reflection

The Daniel stories were my favourite Sunday School stories. I loved the names that Nebuchadnezzar gave to the three Hebrew youths: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. On the wireless Housewives Choice often played requests for the Louis Armstrong version of the story "There was three children from the land of Israel...". 75 years later I am reflecting on the Old Testament legends that caught my childhood imagination. I look at the silver pocket watch on the table. It belonged to my great grandfather and his name is engraved on the back: "Shadrack Moth 1888". His brother was called Hezekiah! It is the last reminder of my family's Ashkenazy roots, settling in Britain after one of the pogroms to which Europe was prone. Like the three youths in the story, they were exiles in a strange land, and future generations would have new names, like Albert, Walter, and Lily.

For me, Daniel is an extraordinary book; it's not prophecy in the sense of predicting the future. Written about 160 BC when the Jews were resisting the efforts of Antiochus Epiphanes to turn them into good Greeks, it's a tale of exile in a strange land and holding on to the faith of your birth. The Daniel legends are curiously similar to Joseph stories, another exile with the power to interpret royal dreams. Daniel in the lion's den, or his three friends in the fiery furnace talking to a heavenly being, were not predictions of the future but proclamations of the faith in which they had been brought up, and the belief in a God who joined with, and stood by them, in their trials and tribulations. That has always been the story of the people of God, Ashkenazy or Christian,



Thursday 25th July

The Rev'd Peter Moth, retired minister in the Northern Synod at St Andrew's URC Kenton, Newcastle upon Tyne.

Reading: Daniel 3: 19 - 30

Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace to be heated up seven times more than was customary, and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counsellors, 'Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?' They answered the king, 'True, O king.' He replied, 'But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.' Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, 'Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!' So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counsellors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them. Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship

If you want to make this a lesson on the benefits of vegetarianism, go ahead. I believe it is more poignantly a lesson on the values of peaceful, prophetic action to maintain the sacredness of our humanity in a world that enslaves us. Perhaps the greatest prophetic move here is that compassion ultimately reveals the inherent good in everyone, even our oppressors. The prophetic language begins not with anger and judgement, but with compassion and understanding.

Prayer

Living Lord, we pray for those doing good for the least of these. But we also pray for those making life for the least of these a living hell. Stretch their hearts toward compassion. For them and ourselves, may You make us prisoners of hope in disoriented times. Amen.

Wednesday 17th July

The Rev'd William Young, Minister, Essenside URC Glasgow and Morison Memorial URC Clydebank

Reading: Daniel 1: 18 - 21

At the end of the time that the king had set for them to be brought in, the palace master brought them into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, and the king spoke with them. And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they were stationed in the king's court. In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus.

## Reflection

The media tend to lampoon young people—the “hipster” generation—for their unorthodox ways, entitled personalities and lack of knowledge. They always have, right? Sometimes young people can surprise us at the very moment we are losing faith in them—and subsequently, humanity itself. As I write I am reading of 16 year old Greta Thunberg who is capturing the attention of politicians the world over on climate change.

Our Drumchapel congregation runs ‘Friendship House’, a global café and support centre for refugees and asylum seekers. One of the great lessons our friends teach us is they light up when we treat them not as inferior beings (that need our help because we are so great and good), but as people with skills that can build up the community. They teach us how to cook food in their culture as opposed to us showing them how to cook in ways which, justifiably so, most of them detest.

That can be a challenge for volunteers, most of whom are elder women who have fed their families and church community for ages with no problem. The “experts” get a lesson in quality and good taste every week now, via foreigners younger than them.

It was a risky scheme, but the Hebrew ‘talented tenth’ living in the palace have found favour with Nebuchadnezzar. The diet of their culture have made them stronger and, maybe not smarter, but more connected to the wisdom of their faith in that they can interpret and influence the world around them.

This is not necessarily an ancient advertisement for superfoods! However, in difficult times it is crucial to have people, even youth, who can embrace tradition as a way of reorienting a disoriented world.

Elihud Kipchoge, world record marathoner said, “Everybody has talent, but that’s not enough...talent and passion go together.” This text

Secondly, it concedes an “if not”. It is one thing for us to affirm that God “is able” but many of us have had to wrestle with the anguish of instances where despite faith and prayer the desired result has not been the outcome. Hopes may have been raised but, humanly speaking, disappointment has come and faith has been dented. Some of us are even tempted to change “if not” to “when not”.

Thirdly, however, the resolve of these three is that they will hold on to faith – for which, perhaps, read “trust that God holds on to them” – even if not. The fiery furnace of daily life blazes and some do not escape its flames. Their resolve is echoed in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane as he is about to be thrown into the furnace of Calvary: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” (Mark 14: 36)

If faith is held on the condition that God rescues us from every furnace it is likely to short-lived. The resolve of the three – and the One – is that even “if not” we will keep faith and, thereby, discover in the flames and on the Cross that God is with us.

Prayer:

God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,  
grant us sufficient faith and trust  
when the furnace of blazing fire threatens  
to consume us or those we love.

God made known in the One who was obedient to the point of death,  
when the cup of suffering is not removed – for us or for those we love  
grant us and them the strength to carry on and an awareness that we  
are not alone and bereft but upheld and enabled by your grace.  
Amen.

Wednesday 24th July

The Rev'd Geoffrey Clarke, Minister, The Crossing (Methodist & United Reformed Church) & Wales Kiveton Methodist Church

Reading: Daniel 3: 13 - 18

Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in; so they brought those men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?' Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defence to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of 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 statue that you have set up.'

Reflection

The resolve of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego resonates with my own experience and articulates my own faith. It is also, I suggest, a resolve that has echoes of our Dissenting spirit.

Firstly, it affirms faith and confidence in the power of the God who "is able to deliver". Faced with the prospect of the furnace of blazing fire the faith of these three is that God is greater than the flames and is therefore able to deliver them. In common with the Dissenters they affirm that God is also greater than any human king and can deliver them from such.

expresses the talent and the passion of the Hebrew youngsters in the imperial palace. It also gives the Empire a taste of the truth of their God's power.

Prayer

For the young who tune their eyes to see broader than us:  
Lord, give strength, humility, and passion.  
For the 'middle aged' who feel they have missed their moment to change the world:  
Lord, give opportunity and confidence.  
For the aging, who feel their days are far gone:  
Lord, may this youthful generation  
give ear to listen and space to be part of the struggle.  
Help us to love one another. Amen.

Thursday 18th July

The Rev'd William Young, Minister, Essenside URC Glasgow and Morison Memorial URC Clydebank

Reading: Daniel 2: 1-16

In the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed such dreams that his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him. So the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, 'I have had such a dream that my spirit is troubled by the desire to understand it.' The Chaldeans said to the king (in Aramaic), 'O king, live for ever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will reveal the interpretation.' The king answered the Chaldeans, 'This is a public decree: if you do not tell me both the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. But if you do tell me the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and

rewards and great honour. Therefore tell me the dream and its interpretation.’ They answered a second time, ‘Let the king first tell his servants the dream, then we can give its interpretation.’ The king answered, ‘I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see I have firmly decreed: if you do not tell me the dream, there is but one verdict for you. You have agreed to speak lying and misleading words to me until things take a turn. Therefore, tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation.’ The Chaldeans answered the king, ‘There is no one on earth who can reveal what the king demands! In fact no king, however great and powerful, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king is asking is too difficult, and no one can reveal it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with mortals.’ Because of this the king flew into a violent rage and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. The decree was issued, and the wise men were about to be executed; and they looked for Daniel and his companions, to execute them. Then Daniel responded with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the king’s chief executioner, who had gone out to execute the wise men of Babylon; he asked Arioch, the royal official, ‘Why is the decree of the king so urgent?’ Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. So Daniel went in and requested that the king give him time and he would tell the king the interpretation.

### Reflection

A clever thing happens in the book of Daniel, from 2:4 until 8:1: the language changes from Hebrew to Aramaic!

Hebrew is the mother tongue, the language of YHWH. Aramaic was the global language, the language of Empire and trade. Most of the enslaved Hebrews after a time would have been more fluent in Aramaic than their mother tongue.

Biblical commentary bought from an ‘American marketplace’ on the web, and really looking forward to the next ‘superhero universe’ movie.

Yes – I’d like to THINK I’d resist the Empire.

The Empire is quite persuasive as it uses rhetoric to play on our fears, our laziness, our busyness, our apathy, our lack of experience, etc. The Empire’s rhythm drives us forward to who knows where, but at least we are moving, right? And whether we like it or not, we find ourselves marching to its beat.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to march to that beat. The Empire (forgive me) struck back. A fourth figure appeared in the flames alongside them, playing a different tune.

Jesus is the “Lord of the Dance” as the song goes. His song sounds different. It’s a gentler swaying rhythm, that whispers life. Sometimes – if you stop moving to the Empire’s beat – if you google ‘Christ’ with your heart, you can hear Christ’s song. And when you dance to Christ’s rhythms, people notice. Some won’t understand. Some however might find themselves also moving to the ancient heavenly beats of God.

Love God, love neighbours, love each other.

Go out, reach out, love enemies.

Free captives and oppressed,  
bless persecutors.

Open eyes, share the good news of Jesus the Christ.

Holy God, You created us to walk and to dance with you.

Sometimes our steps get muddled. God, we are sorry.

Help us to keep in step with you and to invite others into Your dance.

Amen

dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. When they were standing before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, the herald proclaimed aloud, 'You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire.' Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Accordingly, at this time certain Chaldeans came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'O king, live for ever! You, O king, have made a decree, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, shall fall down and worship the golden statue, and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These pay no heed to you, O king. They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up.'

### Reflection

This scene reminds me of a song by Third Day called "Never Bow Down". The Empire demands allegiance. It sets up an image and a test. Will you dance to the Empire's tune? Or will you risk the Empire's glare of disapproval? Will you instead seek God's rhythm of life and move within God's divine beats?

I'd like to think I'd be like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and stand up to the Empire – as I write this whilst lounging on my 'Swedish branded' sofa, sipping an 'American brand' coffee, having consulted a

At the moment the language shifts to acceptable language, one hears the other holy men say: "tell your servants to interpret the dream". The king challenges the holy men to 'guess' what he is dreaming, then interpret it. There is a big difference between knowing what to say and knowing what needs to be said. Nebuchadnezzar already knows the representatives of popular religion are ill-equipped to see his anguish. He is set to put popular religion to death because it is not deep enough to see through him.

When religion reaches the zenith of its popularity at best and at worst is obvious to everyone, it loses public trust and its prophetic edge. Let's be honest: sometimes our lament on the decline of the Church is really a lament on the loss of Christian superiority in public life: Victorian buildings no longer are easily filled; stadiums don't overflow like the Billy Graham days; children can no longer recite the Lord's Prayer from memory. We say, "The church is dead." We give up on faith. We tell folks things they want to hear. We water down worship. We stop preaching. We never liked doing it anyway, so why bother? We ask, "What are we doing wrong and how can WE fix it?" When religion is popular and obvious, we go into 'survival' mode.

This episode teaches that prophetic wisdom opens communication and saves lives. It is a language that sets captives free and even brings monarchs to their knees. It is a language that can see through the emperor's dreams, yet speaks clearly in any language.

### Prayer

Tune our ears and defrost our hearts, Ground of our Being.  
Tune our ears to your heartbeat, Your music, Your song.  
Cause compassion to burn  
in deeply frozen hearts made cold by the politics of survival.  
Make out of us a people who will hear, live, and feast on Your Wisdom.  
Amen.

Friday 19th July

The Rev'd James Church is Minister of Radford Road Church and Lillington Free Church, Royal Leamington Spa.

Reading: Daniel 2: 17 - 23

Then Daniel went to his home and informed his companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions with the rest of the wise men of Babylon might not perish. Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven.

Daniel said:

'Blessed be the name of God from age to age,

for wisdom and power are his.

He changes times and seasons,

deposes kings and sets up kings;

he gives wisdom to the wise

and knowledge to those who have understanding.

He reveals deep and hidden things;

he knows what is in the darkness,

and light dwells with him.

To you, O God of my ancestors,

I give thanks and praise,

for you have given me wisdom and power,

and have now revealed to me what we asked of you,

for you have revealed to us what the king ordered.'

Reflection

In an ancient kingdom a powerful ruler sets his experts a deadly test, 'reveal to me my dream and its interpretation, or pay the ultimate price'. Concerned for his life and that of others, a mid-level advisor makes a promise that he cannot in his own strength keep, to reveal the

With the troubling dream interpreted, the mighty King Nebuchadnezzar recognises that he stands before a power and reality greater than himself. He bows before the Jewish exile – the tables are turned and God, 'the revealer of mysteries' is worshipped. The presence of the God who creates and saves is glimpsed.

We long for distorted power to be confronted in our world today. We long for those who worship themselves to recognise the one who alone is worth worshipping. How may this be happening in our times? How might we be part of that subversive movement?

God of gods, Power over all power  
be present in our world today  
and give us eyes to glimpse you in unexpected places,  
minds to grapple with your mysteries,  
hearts to be lifted in worship  
and lives turned upside down by your love and truth.

Tuesday 23rd July

The Rev'd Angela Rigby is the Minister at Christ Church URC Tonbridge and St Johns Hill URC Sevenoaks.

Reading: Daniel 3: 1 - 12

King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue whose height was sixty cubits and whose width was six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to assemble and come to the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. So the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, assembled for the

Monday 22nd July

The Rev'd Terry Hinks, minister of Trinity, High Wycombe and Cores End URC

Reading: Daniel 2: 46 - 49

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, worshipped Daniel, and commanded that a grain-offering and incense be offered to him. The king said to Daniel, '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!' Then the king promoted Daniel, gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king's court.

Reflection

What happens when Church and State clash, when power and truth collide, when empires are confronted by the Living God? What happens when service to country is at odds with conscience? The Book of Daniel speaks of these tensions and conflicts which echo down the centuries into our own times.

Though written centuries later, the Book's setting is in the time of exile in Babylon, following the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem. Daniel and his three companions are promoted in the king's service and are trained in the Babylonian language, culture and customs. Yet for all the pressure to conform and to forget the faith of the exiles, they hold onto their Jewish faith and practice. The time comes when Daniel, with all his old and new found wisdom, offers to interpret the dreams that have been troubling the king. He makes clear (like Joseph did before Pharaoh) that the interpretation belongs not to him, but to God.

king's dream and its interpretation, to speak of something that no mere mortal can know. For who can search the hearts and the minds of men and who can discern their thoughts from afar? Find the answer in Psalm 139:1-6.

It is perhaps because of this Psalm that Daniel takes up the challenge, with confidence, rather than going into hiding he goes to the chief of secret police and appeals for time. Then Daniel returns to his companions to seek mercy from the God of heaven. In other words, they pray.

I spoke to a friend today who feels his boss has set him an impossible task. I speak to people most weeks who fear for a future that neither they, nor I, can reasonably be expected to know. We all meet people in our lives whose problems seem beyond our comprehension.

Though none of these matters are beyond the God we worship, the God of heaven, the Alpha and the Omega, who knows the beginning and the end, and is Lord over the unseen spiritual realm as much as over the kingdoms of this earth. Just as this God is ready to hear the prayers of Daniel and his companions, God is ready to hear our prayers too.

Daniel is indeed a wise man, but part of wisdom is knowing our limitations and trusting the One whose knowledge is unlimited. God reveals the answer to Daniel in a vision, and Daniel gives thanks for that – to the God of heaven, God beyond us, but also to the God of his ancestors, the God who has come close; the God revealed to us in covenant love.

God of the heavens,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all secrets are known,  
and from whom nothing is hidden,  
teach us to come to you in wisdom<sub>13</sub> and humility;

to turn to you on behalf of others,  
when we cannot see a way forward,  
when fears threaten to overwhelm,  
when faced with problems beyond understanding,  
that through our living and praying,  
we may point to your love and power.  
In Jesus' precious name. Amen.

Saturday 20th July

The Rev'd Fiona Thomas, Secretary for Education and Learning,  
member of Christ Church, Bellingham.

Reading: Daniel 2: 24 - 45

Therefore Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, 'Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will give the king the interpretation.'

Then Arioch quickly brought Daniel before the king and said to him: 'I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who can tell the king the interpretation.' The king said to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, 'Are you able to tell me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation?' Daniel answered the king, 'No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or diviners can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen at the end of days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed were these: To you, O king, as you lay in bed, came thoughts of what would be hereafter, and the revealer of mysteries disclosed to you what is to be. But as for me, this mystery has not been revealed to me because of any wisdom that I have more than any other living being, but in order that the interpretation may be known to the king and that you may understand the thoughts of your mind.

Remembering and wondering are intrinsic to the fabric of faith. But we are not always good at remembering the Biblical stories, nor feeling wonder in response to acts of God. Today's psalm rues that on the journey to the Promised Land, people again and again forgot God. Reread the passage and note the times the people ignored or forgot.

Since the 1960s space-age, there has been a drop in church attendance, and we may lament, a loss of the faith narrative, both Biblical stories and the deep truth that they convey. There is a remnant of remembrance and wonder at Christmas, but the heart of the relationship between God, people and our place on earth, including our origins, purpose and destiny, has diminished. It is a communal loss.

I wonder what you cherish of the faith stories, and why?  
I wonder how we may bring alive such stories in our post space-age world?

Whether you remember or forget, turn to verse 44 onwards and you'll find a testimony and an assurance that God never forgets us. That is truly to wonder at. It may even leave us feeling over the moon!

If I look up on a clear, dark night  
and wonder at the heavenly moon-lit, star-spangled sky;  
may I too look with insight in our earthy oft dark world,  
see Christ's presence of light,  
wonder at your deeds and love,  
and reflect them through my life. Amen.



11 Then their adversaries  
foundered;  
not a single one survived.  
12 So the people sang his praises,  
and his promises believed;  
13 But his works they soon forgot,  
and his counsel set at nought.

14 In the desert they surrendered  
to their unremitting greed;  
In the wasteland  
they provoked him,  
craving meat they did not need.  
15 So he gave them  
what they sought,  
but on them disease he brought.

16 In the camp  
they envied Moses,

Aaron too—God’s priest was he.  
17 Earth was split  
and swallowed Dathan  
and Abiram’s company;  
18 There they fell,  
consumed by flame—  
those who had abused  
God’s name.

19 Then they made a calf  
at Horeb—  
served an idol cast in clay;

20 They exchanged  
their highest Glory  
for a bull that feeds on hay.

21 God their saviour they forgot,  
who for them  
great things had wrought.

## Reflection

50 years ago today, at 02:56:15, Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, stepping down from Apollo Lunar Module Eagle, saying:

“That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Those words and the grainy images of ‘dad-like dancing’ in the dark, are embedded in my memory.

The Apollo space missions formed part of the backdrop to my childhood, which I avidly followed in those black and white TV days, soaking up the plethora of facts streaming from Houston. Whilst much detail has receded from my memory, the sense of wonder has not. From time to time I still look up at the moon, remember, and wonder.

‘You were looking, O king, and lo! there was a great statue. This statue was huge, its brilliance extraordinary; it was standing before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of that statue was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked on, a stone was cut out, not by human hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, were all broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing-floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

‘This was the dream; now we will tell the king its interpretation. You, O king, the king of kings—to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the might, and the glory, into whose hand he has given human beings, wherever they live, the wild animals of the field, and the birds of the air, and whom he has established as ruler over them all—you are the head of gold. After you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over the whole earth. And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron; just as iron crushes and smashes everything, it shall crush and shatter all these. As you saw the feet and toes partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the strength of iron shall be in it, as you saw the iron mixed with the clay. As the toes of the feet were part iron and part clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with clay, so will they mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay. And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever; just as you saw that a stone was cut from the mountain not by hands, and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the

clay, the silver, and the gold. The great God has informed the king what shall be hereafter. The dream is certain, and its interpretation trustworthy.'

## Reflection

Someone prominent and otherwise revered has “feet of clay” when they have a fundamental flaw or weakness. Like a top heavy metal statue built on unstable foundations. This passage from Daniel may read like the tale of an exile in Babylon getting the better of the troubled despot Nebuchadnezzar, but to its first readers in about 165 BCE, perhaps passing copies from hand to hand, it spoke of the current despot Antiochus Epiphanes and contemporary events. At a time when the latest invaders of Palestine had made possession of the Torah a capital offence, the elaborated legend of Daniel was a cover for sedition. Looking back over the previous 400 years it is unsurprising that the unknown author got some historical details wrong, with memories of the Babylonian, Median, Persian and Greek rulers blurred by time and distortion. The feet of iron and clay, ready to split under pressure, were the current regime installed by Syria and Egypt, and the stone cut without hands which smashed the whole idolatrous construction was God’s Kingdom, centred on Jerusalem, which would endure for ever.

Every earthly empire crumbles in the end. There is a familiar pattern of an aging dynasty gradually dissipating itself through luxurious use of accumulated wealth and over-reaching to take in more territory. A rebellion at the far side of the empire turns into an unstoppable military campaign, and the old order is swept away, to be replaced with an empire which claims that it will be eternal. After a few generations the whole cycle is repeated.

The Book of Daniel is history told backwards, as an encrypted message of encouragement to a subjugated people, reminding them of who is

ultimately in charge and that whatever befalls them they are called to remain faithful to their God.

Enduring God,  
you know that we too have feet of clay.  
Save us from our own imperial thoughts, our desire to control,  
our tendency to follow the loudest voice.  
Release us from the fear that keeps our heads down,  
whispering sedition rather than speaking truth clearly.  
We ask this in the name of the one who lives  
in our heart, our mind, our soul. Amen.

[Sunday 21st July Psalm 106 1 - 21](#)

The Rev’d Dr David Pickering, Member Rutherglen URC, Moderator  
National Synod of Scotland

1 Praise the LORD!  
Extol his goodness!  
for his love endures always.

2 Who can tell  
his mighty actions,  
or in full declare his praise?

3 Blessed are those  
whose way is right,  
acting justly in his sight.

4 When you show  
your people favour,  
then, O LORD, remember me.  
Help me when you come  
to save them;

5 let me know prosperity—  
Joyful with your chosen race,  
joining them in giving praise.

6 We have sinned,  
just like our fathers;  
we have done what was not right.  
7 When our fathers were in Egypt  
they despised  
your deeds of might.  
All your mercies they ignored—  
at the Red Sea spurned the LORD.

8 Yet for his name’s sake  
he saved them  
and revealed his mighty hand.  
9 By his word the Sea he parted,  
led them through as on dry land—  
10 From the hand of foes set free,  
rescued from the enemy.