

Sunday 19th September 2022
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Daniel 3:1-18 (n.b. vv. 16-18)
Theme: "Furnaces & Faith"
(see R.M. Brown, Unexpected News, pp- 142-156)
"But even if He doesn't, we will continue in faith"
(the great "nevertheless" of faith)

Introduction:

It's quite a story, this one from the book of Daniel. It's one that I remember very clearly from my Sunday School days.... But sadly this story isn't read in church at all these days as part of the three year cycle of readings that we use. It's sad because this story is the incredibly powerful story of the faith of three men: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Part 1: "The God whom we serve is able to save us"

I don't know if you remember the story all that well. But it goes like this. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia is feeling insecure His popularity is waning and there have been some uprisings in one of the outlying provinces. And an editorial in *the Babylonian Advertiser* has hinted, ever so gently, that the king is over the hill (*I'm embellishing this a little*).

So the king designs a ceremony to draw the country back together: around himself. A huge gold statue is installed in a public park where it can be seen for tens of kilometres around. And the people are commanded to bow down and worship the image. And that's what they do, because they know that if they don't the king has said that they will be fried alive (*Dan. 3:6*).

By bowing down to this gold statue, the people are showing their total loyalty and utter obedience to King Nebuchadnezzar. They

are in a real sense bowing down to Nebuchadnezzar and saying by their actions: **“O King, live forever we will do whatever you command us”** (cf. Dan. 3:9).

So the king can breathe easier. With such widespread sentiments of steadfast loyalty, King Nebuchadnezzar can sit back and relax a little. But can he!? Some informers tell him that three men, three Jews, have refused to bow down to the gold statue. And to top it off, these three men are trusted civil servants of his who are in charge of the affairs of the province of Babylon (Dan. 3:12).

The king summons these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, into his presence and decides that this is no time for negotiation. He must be tough and show them who's boss. He gives it to them straight: either they fall down and worship the golden statue immediately or it's the blazing furnace for all three of them. And then convinced that he has the upper hand, he toys with them and asks them what he almost considers to be a rhetorical question:

“And do you think that there is any god who can save you!?”
(Dan. 3:13-15).

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego then go on to give their answer of faith:

“Your Majesty, we will not try to defend ourselves. If the God whom we serve is able to save us from the blazing furnace and from your power, then he will. But even if he doesn't, Your Majesty may be sure that we will not worship your god, and we will not bow down to the gold statue that you have set up”
(Dan. 3:16-18).

They make three points to the King:

- 1) We don't need to defend ourselves before you
- 2) Nevertheless, we inform you, O king, that the God we serve *is able to save us from this blazing furnace and to deliver us out of your hands;*

3) But even if He doesn't do this, be sure that we will not worship your god, nor will we bow down to the gold statue that you have set up.

What a great statement. of faith!!! In fact, it is one of the great “nevertheless” statements in the Bible: “nevertheless”, *regardless*, we will go on trusting in God!!

And in this story, there is what amounts to a Hollywood-type picture ending. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown into the blazing furnace, but they are not harmed in the least because of God's protection of them (*Dan. 3:19-27*).

The account ends with the three of them being respected for their faith and promoted to higher positions of responsibility in the province of Babylon (*Dan. 3:28-30*).

But the whole point of the story is that when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced the fiery furnace and made their statement of faith, they had no idea that things would turn out so well. For God gives no guarantees in advance that He will act *in the way we want Him to act* in a given circumstance. This story that we have looked at this morning was told and retold by generations of Jews to give each new generation an example of faith to hold before them as they lived out their lives.

The story reminded them, *as it reminds each of us*, that “the God we serve is able to save us” from whatever calamity or danger or threat that comes our way.

And we tell stories, too, to remind one another *and ourselves* of this, don't we!? I tell the stories of how:

- * **God rescued me from drowning when I was 5-6 years old, or thereabouts, by placing a weed on the bank of a water-hole that I'd fallen into**

- * **God gave me a roof over my head and a job and money to survive on one Christmas break from Luther Seminary when I was quite destitute**
- * **God looked after us and rescued us when we it was made very difficult to stay in Horsham**
- * **More recently, how God rescued me from a heart attack on that tennis court beside the river Torrens**

And I'm sure that you have stories, too, that you tell and retell to remind your loved ones and yourselves that "the God we serve is able to save us"....

Part 2: "But even if He doesn't do this..."

But sometimes, *and even it appears at times often*, God doesn't act to help us in the way that we would want. At certain times in our life, God appears to be silent. We cry out to Him for help and deliverance from a particular trouble, and we appear to get no answer. God doesn't answer in the way that we want Him to.

And we don't have to think too far or too hard to think of illustrations of this in our own life. Maybe, even, God appears to be silent to you at the moment as you cry out to Him to save you from a particular trouble....

And, no doubt, you can think of Christian friends who have cried out to God for deliverance in a particular way from a particular trouble, and yet God appeared to be silent....

Why does God sometimes, *even often it seems at times*, appear silent? Why doesn't God always act to help us in the way that we want? After all, we are *His children* through our baptism and our faith in Jesus as our Saviour. Surely God would want us to live out our full life serving Him, and surely He would want us to be happy and content and in good health while we are doing this!?

Let's stop a moment and return to basics:

- 1) God's heart overflows with love for all people, for everyone. I know that and you know that by looking at Jesus, God's Son, *and by looking at the cross in particular*. For the cross reminds us of how deep God's love is for us all and how far God was prepared to go out of love for us all: to allow His only Son, part of His Very Being, to suffer and to die a criminal's death on a cross for you and me and everyone.
- 2) We who are baptised and who cling to Jesus: as our Saviour are God's children.

God is "our Father in heaven" and we are His dear children. And like all good dads *and mums*, God our Father wants what is good for us (*Matt. 7:7-11; Rom. 8:28*).

As dads and mums, sure we want health and happiness for our children.... But most of all, don't we want our children to be strong in their faith in God as their loving Father and in Jesus as their Saviour and Lord, because we know that this brings real happiness!?

And this is what God wants for us too: that we trust in Him, and *rely utterly* on Him and on Jesus as our Saviour.... And that we more and more follow Jesus as we live out our lives (*read C.S. Lewis "Screwtape Letters",45-46*).

This is what God wants for each of us, and for the body of Christ as a whole, and indeed for everyone: that we grow in our faith and in freely giving of ourselves for others as Jesus did. This is His objective and that's what He's working towards even if we can't see it in particular instances.

One of my favourite illustrations in this regard is that of a tapestry. When you look at a tapestry from the underneath side, all you see is a mass of tangled threads. But when you look at it from the right side up, you see a beautiful picture. It's the same with us and life: often when we look at our lives

all we see is a mass of tangled threads, but from God's perspective a beautiful picture is being woven.

- 3) In particular situations, we approach God as children go to their dear father or mother, and we ask Him for what we want, confident that if it is His will, *if it is for our good and the good of His kingdom*, He will give it to us (Matt. 7:7-11; 1 John 5:14). And we approach God, too, aware that His loving will may not be what we want....

To draw the human analogy as Jesus does in Matthew chapter seven and as we did in the Children's Address this morning, if my sons ask me for things, I give it to them *if it is for their good....* But if what they ask for isn't for their good, and in fact will be harmful to them, I don't give it to them....

- 4) One final comment with regard to "death". We see "death" often as a disaster and a tragedy of unfulfilled life, *particularly when death comes at a young age, or even in the womb.* But in God's eyes, death for one of His is simply the gateway to being with Him where life is as it should be. Our life here is simply a tiny fraction of our real life....

C.S. Lewis makes this clear at the end of his Narnia Tales, in his book "The Last Battle".

One of the main characters, Lucy, says to the Jesus figure, Aslan the lion:

"We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often'. 'No fear of that', said Aslan. 'Have you not guessed?'. Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them. 'There was a real railway accident', said Aslan softly. 'Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is morning.

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion: but the things that began to happen after that were so great and

beautiful that I cannot write of them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story.

All their life in the world and their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before (*The Last Battle*, p. 165).

Conclusion:

Sure, seemingly unanswered prayer, is bewildering and can be even faith threatening. But we as followers of Jesus know that the heart of God overflows with love for all people, *and particularly for His children.*

We know this because we know Jesus and we know the lengths to which God went out of love for us all. We know that our good, loving God is working for our good in all that He allows to happen to us, *because we know the heart of God through Jesus (cf. Rom. 8:28).*

And so, in the face of hardship and trouble, we can say with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego:

“The God we serve is able to save us..., and even if He does not...”, NEVERTHELESS we will remain faithful to God, for He is worthy of our faith and trust!