

Sermon Given by

Simon Scott

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Daniel 4 - "The madness of a King"

I want to begin this morning by inviting you to imagine that King Nebuchadnezzar has asked you to include him as a friend on Facebook. It's a bizarre thought – but perhaps verses 1-2 of Daniel 4 suggest that the political candidates in our own Election race are not the only ones who want to communicate by Facebook, Twitter and whatever means they can.

Nebuchadnezzar has a message which he considers important for us whoever and wherever we are, if you look at those verses:

Ch 4 v 1: ¹ King Nebuchadnezzar,

***To the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world:
May you prosper greatly!***

² It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.

With the advent of the internet, communication criss-crosses the globe very fast today and we are able to tell people we've never met about ourselves in a way which was unimaginable only a few years ago.

Some of us take full advantage. In January this year the tabloids carried a story about a groom interrupting his own wedding to update his status on Facebook and Twitter. As the minister pronounced the couple man and wife, the unnamed groom whipped out his mobile to Tweet: 'standing at the altar with Tracy Paige, where, just a second ago, she became my wife! Gotta go, time to kiss my bride.' He then handed his wife the phone so she could change her Facebook profile from 'in a relationship' to 'married'.

Daniel 4 brings before us the only man in the 6th c BC who had the power to tweet **his** change of status to everyone round the known world. But it isn't really a message about Nebuchadnezzar at all, great king though he was. It's all about an even greater king – the God of heaven and earth.

See what he says about him in verse 3:

³ How great are his signs,

how mighty his wonders!

His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;

his dominion endures from generation to generation.

Presumably if his kingdom is an eternal kingdom, which endures from generation to generation then this King - God Almighty – is big news not just for all people, but for all time. Which means everyone of us here, whether we are Christians or not have something to learn from Nebuchadnezzar's blog spot.

The change of status is referred to in the last sentence of the chapter: those who walk in pride he is able to humble. That is Nebuchadnezzar's own testimony – God had humbled him. And I want to follow that process through three stages.

1 God humbled Nebuchadnezzar though the dream.

In verse 4 everything is going absolutely fine for him ⁴ ***I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous.***

But Nebuchadnezzar wasn't the first or the last person to discover that health, wealth and happiness are very fragile commodities.

We see that in verse 5: ⁵ ***I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in my bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me.***

Of course it had happened before. There was the dream about a massive statue made of gold, silver, iron and clay which got smashed by a rock, back in chapter 2.

And there are similarities to that dream in the vision here, if we look at verses 10-15 ¹⁰ ***These are the visions I saw while lying in my bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. ¹¹ The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. ¹² Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.***

¹³ ***"In the visions I saw while lying in my bed, I looked, and there before me was a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven. ¹⁴ He called in a loud voice: 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. ¹⁵ But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.***

Once again this is a dream where something very big and impressive comes crashing down to the ground. You may have noticed that the dream itself had some interpretation included in it – because a heavenly messenger, an angel gives the command for the tree to be chopped down and in the dream itself, before Daniel says anything, the angel explains something of what is happening in verse 17. ¹⁷ ***"The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.'***

It is quite a text for an election week, isn't it? Even if Nebuchadnezzar starts the night contented and prosperous, all it takes is a dream like this to shake him to his boots. **His** kingdom is not unshakeable, but a God who predicts things through dreams knows the end from the beginning? He really is in control of the kingdoms of mankind. It looks like a Nebuchadnezzar is in control on earth – but he isn't. God sends the dream to make that clear.

Even more humbling is a second point.

2. God humbles Nebuchadnezzar through his servant Daniel.

Exactly as happened in chapter 2, all the astrologers and magicians are summoned to explain the dream but they can't or won't speak up. It's left to Daniel the servant of God to explain the vision. No mystic Meg or Russell Grant can reveal God's plans – only his servant, Daniel. That is surely humbling.

The reason is something even Nebuchadnezzar seems dimly aware of: he comments twice that the spirit of the holy Gods is in Daniel. And even if his theology is not perfect, he is right: Daniel is God's person for the hour.

It is a wonderful picture for us of the way God can place his people in position to speak his word when it needs to be heard. Because we know the one who holds the future, God's

servants can be the people to bring understanding to a situation when no-one else can make sense of it. Daniel is therefore a standing lesson for us all.

Clearly in verse 19 he doesn't relish the job he has been given.

¹⁹ Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you."

Belteshazzar answered, "My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries!"

Remember that Daniel had been deported from his homeland: he was speaking to the very ruler who had demolished his city and butchered his countrymen. He now hears about a dream which obviously predicts the king's downfall. But he doesn't laugh inwardly – 'Ha! Ha! Ha! At last you are getting your come-uppance'; there is no gloating. Only compassion: 'I wish it didn't have to be this way, oh King'. He is a living breathing example of obedience to that command of Jesus, 'love your enemies'.

And yet married to that compassion is courage, when Daniel unpacks the dream's implications in verses 24- 27:

²⁴ "This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: ²⁵ You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. ²⁶ The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. ²⁷ Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

Nebuchadnezzar hadn't asked for advice, but with great courage, Daniel nonetheless gives it. He tells the king unmistakably that he must acknowledge that God is ruler – that required courage... and then he spells out exactly what that will mean – 'stop oppressing people and start to do what is right'.

That was nothing less than to suggest a complete overhaul of Nebuchadnezzar's official state policy. He had built an empire by oppressing and exploiting. Daniel tells him that he cannot behave as if he is in charge in God's world. What courage!

It all makes me pause to ask: who is the bigger individual here? Nebuchadnezzar or Daniel? Surely the answer is Daniel: the messenger sent by God to give a dressing down to the most powerful human being on earth at the time.

As I hinted, there are lessons here for Christians – for example Christians in the secular workplace who feel dwarfed by those in authority over them. Daniel, you remember wasn't a professional prophet – he was a civil servant. But as so often happens, it is not professional ministers, but godly people in what we call secular employment who are in position to speak his word to those who need to hear it.

God may have you in place in your company for a moment like this. And if we can muster the compassion that Daniel shows here and the courage he shows, who knows what might result.

It's worth saying that this moment was built on a lifetime's service and integrity on the part of Daniel. He had lived all his adult life, honouring God in Nebuchadnezzar's service, before he had the opportunity to speak this way. But never doubt if you are a Christian that with God's word you can be a hugely significant force even in the lives of those who think they are really something. **God humbled Nebuchadnezzar through his servant, Daniel.**

Thirdly: **God humbled Nebuchadnezzar by means of the illness he suffered.** Let me read on in verses 28 – 32.

²⁸ **All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar.** ²⁹ **Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon,** ³⁰ **he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"**

³¹ **The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you.**

³² **You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."**

So 12 months had passed and the dream, it seems, was almost forgotten. Maybe Nebuchadnezzar was allowing himself to say that Daniel's dream was sheer nonsense. He was the Great Ruler on earth not the Lord God of Israel.

On one level perhaps he had plenty to be proud of: The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were one of the seven wonders of the Ancient world.

But then the one who had delusions of being **more than** human suddenly suffers a crushing illness and, fittingly he has delusions that he is **less than** human. He behaves as if he is an animal.

This is a recognised medical condition, called Lycanthropy – a person thinks himself to be an animal while still preserving sufficient inner consciousness to remember who they actually are. But how tragic that it took this to break Nebuchadnezzar – his deepest humiliation comes at the moment of his most overweening pride.

Last week our preacher made the very telling point that we are not to look at Nebuchadnezzar and pat ourselves on the back as if we are not capable of that pride. I wonder if you noticed that tendency of ours last year when Michael Jackson died. He was it seems someone like Nebuchadnezzar - he had a giant ego and a very fragile psychological make up with it.

But from the Christian point of view, he was not so very different from each one of us. We all display overt egotism in many ways in our lives – but in Michael Jackson's case his money and his fame made it more obvious.

So we may not have the cash to float vast statues of ourselves on boats down the river Thames, as he did - but who among us has never wanted to draw attention to ourselves?

And we may not have built a Neverland Fantasy fortress around ourselves and filled it with our favourite pleasures for us alone to enjoy – but we'd certainly like to.

The author Paul Theroux visited Neverland once and described how 'it was filled with images, many of them depicting Michael elaborately costumed, in heroic poses'. It sounds tacky, put like that – but we all idolise ourselves and we probably pose heroically in many areas of our own hearts.

I don't doubt that language like Nebuchadnezzar's in verse 30 occasionally crosses our minds even if it doesn't pass our lips. 'Look what a career I have built; look what a family I've built; look what a ministry I've built'.

We must take great care if that is the way we find ourselves thinking. It may leave God with one option only – the forced humiliation which he brought on Nebuchadnezzar. Imagine you book a self-catering holiday cottage and when you arrive you discover that there is a factory next door with a hammer drill which keeps pounding all night long – and it's deafening, you don't sleep at all the first night of the holiday – the whole bed is shaking.

On the second night the noise is still there but you do manage a few minutes' sleep – well you're so exhausted you can't help it.

Of course by the end of the week with the hammering still going you're sleeping like a baby, as soundly as the people who have lived near the factory all their lives. You don't even notice the noise that once seemed so deafening.

Something like that has been happening to Nebuchadnezzar with the things of God. God had been knocking, knocking, knocking on the door. Daniel's witness in chapter one; Daniel interpreting the dream in chapter two; the fiery furnace in chapter three.

Knock, knock, knock – and he has got so used to God's knocking he no longer hears it. And so in chapter four, God knocks with such force that the door comes right off its hinges.

It takes that to bring him to his senses: ³⁴ ***At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.***

***His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.***

The punchline comes in verse 37:

³⁷ ***Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.***

It's an apt message for politicians. We must pray for them... But you see what message Nebuchadnezzar wants to communicate to you and to me? Don't put God in the same position as I did. Those who walk in pride God is able to humble, but he would far rather that we humble ourselves.

And from our vantage point after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that should be an even more obvious message for us

Perhaps you remember one of Jesus parables was also about a tree. I can't help felling that Jesus told his parable of the mustard seed with this dream of Nebuchadnezzar in mind. Because Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which grows into a huge tree – so huge that the birds of the air shelter in its branches.

The echoes of Nebuchadnezzar's dream are too obvious for that to be a coincidence. Jesus is saying that His kingdom is the great kingdom and he is the great king. He is the king who provides shelter, not Nebuchadnezzar – and not you and me, if we have any delusions of grandeur.

And let's remember as we come to communion this morning and focus on Jesus' death that in his kingdom, the only way up is down.

'The kingdoms of the world go by
In purple and in gold.
They rise, they flourish and they die
And all their tale is told.

One kingdom only is divine;
One banner triumphs still –
Its king a servant and its sign
A cross upon a hill.'

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>.
These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)