

Sermon Given by

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### Daniel 5 - "The writing on the wall"

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It is an interesting time to be looking at the book of Daniel, as we come to terms with the uncertainties of the first hung parliament for a number of years in the United Kingdom. It has been a chastening experience for the three main party leaders and maybe we will look back on events with thanks that the electoral confusion ruled out the self-importance which is such a temptation for any national leader.

One of the repeated lessons of the chapters we have been looking at in Daniel 1-4 has been the folly of human arrogance. In the first four chapters of the book Nebuchadnezzar is the chief example of that. We had a good example of Nebuchadnezzar's arrogance last week, strolling on his roof gazing down at his city Babylon and saying to himself – 'look at what I have achieved. Aren't I something?!' And while the words were still on his lips, God passed sentence on that arrogance and that moment he lost his mental faculties and went mad.

It reminded me of that episode from the American Civil War. General John Sedgwick, known affectionately as 'Uncle John', arrived near Spotsylvania Virginia in May 1864. He was standing with his chief of staff near a battery and ordering an infantry troop to a new position.

Then some enemy sharpshooters a mile or so away opened fire. Sedgwick's troops ducked and dodged. And the general amicably chastised his boys, claiming: 'they couldn't hit an elephant at this distance'.

At that very moment, a man was walking just in front of the general, and he heard a bullet whistling through the air and sprawled on the floor. Sedgwick nudged him with his boot, ashamed of his timidity. 'They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance'. The man stood and saluted; Sedgwick dismissed him.

Then there was another whistling sound, followed by a dull thud. The chief of staff was about to resume conversation when the general turned to him with a hole under his left eye, spurting blood, and then fell into his arms dead. He'd just assumed the enemy were using short range rifles. In fact the sharpshooter that felled him was holding a British made Whitworth sniper rifle, equipped with a telescopic sight. The folly of human arrogance...

The punch-line of Daniel Chapter 4 is its very last sentence, in verse 37. ***'Those who walk in pride, he is able to humble'***.

Those, in fact, were words spoken by Nebuchadnezzar. This was a lesson that he had learned. God had to humble him, but he appears to have been willing to learn from the experience.

Nebuchadnezzar is in marked contrast one of the Babylonian rulers who came after him, Belshazzar – whose story is told in our chapter today. But we are going to see that even

though Belshazzar continues unrepentant to the end – still, in his case as well, God is able to humble those who walk in pride.

Notice to begin with that **God will not be mocked**. In verse 1, Belshazzar is hosting a massive party. <sup>1</sup> **King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.**

We only discover in the last verse of the chapter that his city is under siege, with foreign armies massing outside the walls. So a party is a strange way to carry on, but it isn't the **bravado** of the occasion, laughing in the face of disaster which we are meant to notice, nor even the **booze** which was no doubt flowing a little too freely. The **blasphemy** is what verses 2-4 highlights

<sup>2</sup> **While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father <sup>[d]</sup> had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.** <sup>3</sup> **So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them.** <sup>4</sup> **As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.**

Do you notice there how it wasn't just that the temple's goblets were being used instead of the normal palace crockery. They were being used for some sort of religious activity. So he's not just showing minor disrespect for a foreign deity – rather like the careless tourist who doesn't remove shoes in the holy place of a foreign religion... It's much more serious than that.

Suppose that I decide that I rather like the church's communion silver and I would love to use it to smarten up a wine and cheese party – Don't worry, I'm not going to do it. That would certainly be distasteful.

But Belshazzar's action is going a whole stage further. It would be like someone using the church's communion silver for a Satanic ritual.

The implication in Belshazzar's behaviour is obviously – 'this God is a conquered deity – nothing special; nobody takes him seriously'. And yet his guests are stupid enough to praise their own gods, inanimate and lifeless gods of gold and silver, iron, wood and stone. What arrogance and blasphemy, we are meant to think – treating the True and living God as a joke and giving homage to the symbols of prosperity – gold and silver. As if material prosperity is what mattered and God was irrelevant.

The media all around us today are in the habit poking fun at the things of God. The implication being that it's OK to do so because there are no objective realities behind the Christian faith to be taken seriously. Don't let yourself be taken in by them. Beware treating the True and Living God as a joke. Beware giving homage to other religions or to the idolatries of the day: we're under huge pressure to do so in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society.

And God will not be mocked. In Belshazzar's case it only took a second to puncture the arrogance: let me read verses 5-9.

**<sup>5</sup> Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. <sup>6</sup> His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.**

**<sup>7</sup> The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers <sup>[e]</sup> and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."**

**<sup>8</sup> Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. <sup>9</sup> So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.**

What is it that terrifies him? The hand on the wall is if you like a symbol of the unknown invading the known. Suddenly all Belshazzar's confidence evaporates.

Something similar happens for us whenever death interrupts the course of our lives. That is often the way the unknown barges in on the known for us, like the hand-writing on the wall. We expend great effort protecting ourselves from the presence of death – and then we are forcibly reminded of our mortality by the death of a family member or a friend – or some reminder of our own mortality - and in a second the arrogance is gone.

What follows is by now in the book of Daniel a familiar scene. The monarch is terrified by some supernatural phenomenon. The royal knees are knocking. 'Quick!' Everyone thinks, 'Let's get the astrologers in'. It has been said that when we stop believing in God, it isn't that we believe in nothing; we will believe in anything – today people turn to superstition, horoscopes, the occult, spiritualism. Then it was to the magicians. But it was no use. 'All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put the royal knees together again.'

The queen at this point remembers that as verse 11 puts it: '**there is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy Gods in him**'. And so Daniel aged 80 or so by now is summoned.

Do you see what I mean when I say: God will not be mocked? One moment Belshazzar is blaspheming the God of Israel. Then when he is forced to reckon with the supernatural, he is desperate to hear from Daniel, a servant of the very God he has just been mocking.

Normally of course Daniel wasn't on the guest list for the royal parties. I remember reading about a dinner party hosted by one of the upper crust families of Norfolk, the Blofelds – you will perhaps know about Henry Blofeld, the cricket commentator. His mother was called Grizelda and one evening at dinner, there was a guest called Major Bill Batt, who was a local farmer and a keen Christian. After dinner he asked his hostess point blank: 'but surely Grizel you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?' He was answered with an icy glare: 'Not in the drawing room after dinner.'

I doubt Daniel was normally part of the party scene. He wasn't normally called on for after-dinner speeches or bawdy songs; but he was the one to turn to when it came to interpreting mysteries – the things which bring us up short and show us the frivolity of superficiality of our lives. Daniel was just the person you needed when human resources were no good.

I wonder if the people we know would turn to us if we are Christians in the same way, because we are known to be in touch with eternity – so when their familiar world begins to crumble, they turn to us for answers to the questions this world cannot answer.

So lets' move on to consider what Daniel says and on to a second lesson about God.

**God will not be forgotten.** Daniel makes clear that it wasn't just the queen who knew about God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar knew as well.

Let me read from 17-24 <sup>17</sup> ***Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.***

<sup>18</sup> ***"O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. <sup>19</sup> Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. <sup>20</sup> But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. <sup>21</sup> He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.***

<sup>22</sup> ***"But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. <sup>23</sup> Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. <sup>24</sup> Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.***

Daniel begins by reminding Belshazzar about what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar – the events we looked at last week. But the crucial words I want to highlight are in verse 22. ***But you his son, O Belshazzar have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.***

For God to act the way he had in the life of Nebuchadnezzar was meant to be a lesson for Belshazzar. To have someone in your family whom God has dealt with in such a dramatic way is a huge spiritual privilege. It makes me want to say that if you can think of someone in your family who knew the Living God dealing with them, then don't spurn that privilege. Because that spiritual amnesia where we forget the lessons that we should have learned is culpable and serious. **And God will not be forgotten.**

Daniel has no truck at all with Belshazzar's polytheistic culture: 'you know better', he says: you know that there is only one God, the God who holds in his hands your life and all your ways'.

The tragedy of the situation here is that there is nothing Belshazzar can do about it. Daniel doesn't give him any encouragement that anything can be done. It is too late for Belshazzar.

That leads me on to my last point this morning: **God will have the last word.** This is of course what the message written by the hand on the wall makes clear, when it is interpreted in verse 25

<sup>25</sup> ***"This is the inscription that was written:  
Mene , Mene , Tekel , Parsin***

<sup>26</sup> ***"This is what these words mean:  
Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.***

<sup>27</sup> ***Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.***

<sup>28</sup> ***Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."***

The message is a riddle using words for weights and measures taken from the market place –and the words become a pun to describe Belshazzar's life.

'Your days are numbered' – says God – as the Bible says repeatedly to us all: Every one of us this morning has a sell by date stamped upon us the date when either we die or when Christ returns – whichever of those days is sooner. We can't see it; we don't know it, but it is certain for every one of us: our days on earth are numbered.

We should remember that and not treat either our future or the future of those who are dear to us as if it's guaranteed.

'You're weighed on the scales and found wanting' says God: 'judged by me and found seriously lacking'. As we all are. Every one of us here would be found wanting if we were placed on the scales of divine judgement. We cannot balance those scales out by our own good deeds. Our confidence can only ever be that Christ who lived a perfect life and died on the cross for our sins tips the scales for us...

And then a word which applies very specifically to Belshazzar: Your empire is doomed.

It's almost as if Belshazzar hasn't heard a word in verse 29. <sup>29</sup> ***Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.*** 'Big deal', we're tempted to say. Third highest... in a kingdom which was to last an hour or two – because the boots of the Persian army were probably only minutes away from trampling the corridors of the royal palace.

Belshazzar is in denial but ***God has the last word*** in verse 30: <sup>30</sup> ***That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, <sup>31</sup> and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.***

Of course, the fact that God has the last word is a double-edged truth.

It could be construed as a tragic warning – to humble ourselves today if we are not yet following Christ – and not to assume that we can dodge God and dodge the day of our death.

I remember being very moved to read a couple of years ago about the death of Dave Freeman at the young age of only 47 years.

He had been eating breakfast in front of the tv on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, watching as the second plane flew into the World Trade Centre.

He was deeply affected by the experience and he wrote a well known book – 100 things to do before you die. It included things like bull-running in Pamplona; surfing in the nude at Bondi beach; attending the Cannes film festival etc. All the events were graded by bizarre criteria like: 'potential to see blood' or 'Grandma would approve'.

Then in August 2008 he died as a result of a freak accident, hitting his head in a fall at his home. He had only managed to do about half of his suggestions.

If I can put it like this, Belshazzar warns us of the **one** thing we **really must** do before we die – and because we never know the date of our death we cannot afford to postpone this: we must humble ourselves voluntarily before God. Or he will have the last word on us.

At some point in his life, Belshazzar crossed an invisible boundary line between the realm of God's patience and the realm of God's judgement. His story warns us not to risk the same thing ourselves.

There is a clear note of challenge then – but also encouragement if we are God's friends. Think of the relief of God's people reading this, whenever they are faced with tyrants who mock their God and make their life miserable.

What a relief for them when they realise that God has the last word. 'He raises up leaders and he deposes them'. One of the preachers a few weeks back made a very perceptive comment that we couldn't assume that the US dominance of the international stage would continue necessarily. It's not hard to imagine that in a hundred years we could be under the rule of a Chinese empire, or an Islamic Caliphate or coalition. If you are worried about a hung parliament, put that in your pipe and smoke it!

But remember that **God has the last word** – and for his people it is a word of encouragement, that no pagan power can ever outlast him.

The writing is on the wall for every human despot who thinks he can trample over the sensitivities of the people of God. In fact the very power that ended Belshazzar's life would soon be ending the exile of the Jews. Their misery in Babylon and the Christian's exile in a hostile world will not go on for ever. God has the last word...

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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.)