

Sermon Given by

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Daniel 6 - "In the lions' den"

The story of Daniel in the lion's den is one of those half-dozen great tales we hear in Sunday school and never forget. I remember it as a nice children's story with a happy ending. Even the lions in my Bible picture book looked rather cute and cuddly. And definitely soporific. So we might well ask this morning what relevance it has to us living busy lives in 21st century Britain. There's not a lion in sight in Little Shelford. Well, if we think its just a children's story, be prepared for a surprise. Daniel was living and working in a pluralistic, multicultural pagan society. Very similar to ours. There had even been a regime change in the last verse of the previous chapter (5:30). Maybe a touch more extreme than the British regime change that happened following the election last week: One superpower – the Babylonians in chapter 5 – had been replaced by another – the Persian-Mede coalition in chapter 6. Daniel held high positions of power in both. So how did Daniel, with a life-long faith in God live and work in this environment? How did he handle the conflicting allegiances of the Kingdom of God on the one hand and the Kingdom of the Medes & Persians, the kingdom of Darius, on the other?

I would like to make just one main point today. It's this: Daniel lived out his faith in a **consistent, open, straightforward way**. That's all. He did his job well. He was beyond reproach in that. But he was also open and consistent about his belief in God. Like Daniel we need to live lives of consistent, open straightforward faith. Its not rocket science. It's something we can all do. But let me ask you this. Do your colleagues at work know you are a Christian? Or is it something you keep private in a very British way? Do the other mums and dads at the school gate know you are a Christian? Do the people you play tennis or cards with know? Your schoolmates? Its worth thinking that if there was a charge against you of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Daniel wasn't by all accounts a great orator. He didn't give clever speeches or write books proclaiming his faith or evangelise in the coffee breaks. He didn't push his faith on other people. We don't once see him challenging the way other people behaved, or calling into question their beliefs. He just lived out his faith in God in his daily life in a consistent, straightforward unfussy way. And people saw it and recognised it. So lets look at the passage with that one idea in mind. How did that work out in Daniels life? How did he stay as part of the world in which he lived, but not of it. In the world but not of it.

As we go through the passage we'll see the enormous contrast between two kingdoms – the power of the earthly kingdom that King Darius was head of – the world's superpower of its time. And the kingdom of God that Daniel served. Ironically enough this difference was proclaimed not by Daniel, who only says a very few words in this passage, but by king Darius himself, and eventually was proclaimed throughout the Persian kingdom – from the Mediterranean to the river Indus. At the beginning of Daniel chapter 6 we see something of the vigour of this new empire. And Daniel must have been an exceptionally good administrator.

¹ It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, ² with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. ³ Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. But this was too much for the other officials. They were jealous of Daniels's power. Perhaps because he was a foreigner, a Jewish exile from Judea. **⁴At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.** No-one could fault Daniel. He was a reliable trustworthy official in the Persian administration. He served King Darius faithfully and to the best of his abilities. There is a lesson here for us to copy. Finally these jealous official said (v5) **"We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God."** Isn't it interesting that they decided they would get at Daniel through his religion? They obviously knew about his faith. Daniel was quite open about it. But serving his God didn't stop him in any way serving king Darius. So they work out a dirty tricks campaign. Its very success depended on that one aspect of Daniel which was so clear to everyone. His consistent open faith in God. They didn't care about his actual religion. This was a multifaith society. Not at all unlike ours. **⁶ So the administrators and the satraps went as a group to the king and said: "O King Darius, live forever! ⁷ The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den. ⁸ Now, O king, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed."⁹ So King Darius put the decree in writing.**

Well, they flattered Darius and they lied too didn't they? It wasn't true that all the administrators etc agreed, because certainly Daniel didn't. And King Darius, being weak, fell for it. Maybe he justified it to himself by saying that after all, it would help to unite this new kingdom with all its different religions by saying for a that month no-one could worship anyone else but himself. He didn't really mind his officials suggesting that the exception would be that folk could pray to him. So he agreed. Those conspirators understood human nature very well. How did Daniel react? **¹⁰ Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.** Daniel just carried on as he had before. He stuck to his normal routine of praying 3 times a day. There's several things we can learn from that alone. There wasn't any particular religious requirement on the Jews to pray three times a day. It was just the habit of a lifetime that Daniel had developed. When times got tough, he just stuck to his normal habits.

Think too, of Daniel's position. He was one of the three administrators of the entire kingdom. His was a very high pressure job. But he made time to pray morning, noon and night. His officials knew he did that. If there was an important document to sign, a meeting with a foreign dignitary, a business lunch, they would know that he would at his prayers at lunchtime. So they scheduled his diary to fit in with that.

There are lesson for us here in Daniel's attitude. If we are too busy to make time for God, we have got our priorities wrong. There's an old saying that says you can be 'too busy **not** to pray'. Actually if we are open and consistent about our faith, like Daniel. It makes life at work and in the other secular circles in which we move so much more straightforward. It probably doesn't make life easier, because the response of the world is to dislike us or even to hate us for our faith. It may show itself in many subtle ways. You may get sidelined from important meetings. Or miss out on a promotion. But people will be clear about where you stand.

I don't know about you, but I probably wouldn't have done what Daniel did. I would have thought of all sorts of reasons to excuse myself from the danger of ignoring this edict that was so obviously targeted at him. I might have thought to myself 'I've got a really important job, I've got influence at the highest levels of government. Think of the importance of that for influencing policy in a Godly way. I shouldn't throw that away.' Or Daniel might have thought, 'God knows that I am faithful to him. I have been for 80 years. This is only for 30 days. He will understand if I stop my habit of praying just for 30 days. And I don't even have to do anything wrong or go against my faith. I've not been commanded to pray to Darius. Just to stop praying to any other God. So I'll just keep my head down for a bit.' Or he could have quietly prayed in an inner room where people couldn't see him. At his level Daniel could have gone to the king privately and said 'this edict is daft. Can I have a special dispensation?' It probably would have worked because Darius had a very high regard for Daniel. Daniel was a skilled and experienced administrator. He could easily have outmanoeuvred the conspirators. I could have thought of umpteen reasons and ways to avoid what was an almost certain death sentence for something seemingly trivial. But Daniel wouldn't have any of it. He stuck to his normal schedule. The other satraps had judged his character well. They had judged he would be consistent and faithful to his God. And he was.

So Daniel sat by his open window which faced Jerusalem and prayed as usual. Why face Jerusalem? It was in ruins, the temple destroyed, it was occupied by a foreign power. All the leading lights and intelligentsia had been deported. This is just a little indication that Daniel trusted in the God who is sovereign. He trusted in the God who one day would restore his people to Jerusalem. Do we really trust like that in the future kingdom? Are our hearts and minds and eyes set on the kingdom of God rather than the transience of this world? Do we face Jerusalem, so to speak, rather than Cambridge? So Daniels's enemies got out their telephoto lenses and took a picture of Daniel praying to show the king. **(v12) When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him.**

Well King Darius was horrified about this. He had been duped. But there was nothing he could do about it. He was powerless in his own kingdom. And he knew it. He couldn't save Daniel. But we know, because we know what happens, that God is the great rescuer and could save Daniel. So Daniel was thrown into the lion's den and it was sealed up with the seals of both the king and his nobles to make sure Daniel couldn't be sneakily removed in the night. Now that should have been the end of Daniel. He was due to be a meal for the lions. And the only thing Daniel knew for sure was that whatever happened, he wouldn't be giving an after-dinner speech.

Its easy for us to think 'well it was alright for Daniel. We know he'll be OK. But of course Daniel didn't know that at the time. He was being thrown to an almost certain death for having done no wrong. Yet he doesn't utter a word.

Just before we go onto the next vivid scene, which happens next morning after the king has had a sleepless night, its worth commenting on a couple of things. When I was preparing this, I asked several of my graduate students why they thought Daniel had been thrown to the lions. I thought they'd say it was because he had done something bad, something deserving punishment. But actually it turned out that only one of them had even heard of the story. That in itself is quite sobering to remember as we seek to bring the good news of Jesus to those around us. But that one student who had heard about it asked: Did it really happen then? Here's just a tiny little aspect of the story which points to its historic truth. You may remember in a previous chapter that Darius' friends had been thrown into a furnace because of their presumed misdeeds. Why the fire for them and the lions for Daniel? It was because the new superpower, the Persians were Zoroastrians. For them fire was sacred. So they didn't use fiery furnaces any more for punishment. They used lions instead.

Fast forward to the next morning. ¹⁹ ***At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den.*** ²⁰ ***When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"*** ²¹ ***Daniel answered, "O king, live forever!*** ²² ***My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king."*** ²³ ***The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.*** Daniel was unhurt. And he clearly ascribes that to God's protection.. These are the only words recorded from Daniel in this whole story. Daniel didn't blame or ridicule the king. He gave him due and proper honour. But he also pointed clearly and unambiguously to the trust he had in God. Darius promptly throws Daniel's accusers and their families too into the lions den. It is a horrible part of the story. And this bit wasn't in my children's story. I don't suppose Daniel wanted that to happen. But that was the way kings of those days behaved. And the lions were certainly hungry then. Now we see the result of Daniel's faithfulness. ²⁵ ***Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations and men of every language throughout the land: "May you prosper greatly!*** ²⁶ ***"I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. "For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end.*** ²⁷ ***He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions."*** Daniel's actions – his straightforward action of sticking consistently to his pattern of daily prayer sitting by the window in his own house – resulted ultimately in the news of God's power being proclaimed throughout the entire Persian empire.

An order to fear and reverence the living god was proclaimed far and wide throughout the kingdom. There was no way Daniel himself could have achieved that. Yet ironically enough here was the weak and powerless king Darius doing God's will and proclaiming truths about God's kingdom throughout the Persian empire, simply because of Daniel's low-key faithfulness.

And what truths they are. A living God who endures forever. A kingdom that will never end. A God who rescues and saves. A God who continues to rescue and save today and every day through the life and death of his son Jesus. What a contrast with the temporary nature of all earthly kingdoms. All those are doomed to come and go.

What practical applications might we take from this story? One thing I am certain it is not meant to teach is that God will always rescue us from physical harm. We know that hundreds and thousands of Christians were martyred under Roman rule in the first centuries after Christ died. Many of them indeed killed by lions in Roman amphitheatres. And many are still persecuted today. Was their faith any less than Daniel's? No, I'm sure it wasn't. This story of Daniel was the exception. That's why it was written down and preserved. We shouldn't expect physical rescue from every situation. But we can be confident of God's love as we heard in that first reading from Romans. God's love extends everywhere. It extends to the deepest depths, to the darkest corners. There is nowhere we can go, no situation we can be in, where God's love doesn't reach and surround us. And that is a much more powerful thing than our immediate physical comfort. Christians through the ages can testify to that. That is what we should cling on to. But the main application from this passage is that if we are Christians we should live lives of **consistent, open, straightforward faith**. We should fulfil our responsibilities in secular society – whatever they are – to the best of our abilities. And we should be faithful to our God in a consistent, open, natural way. That is how God can best use us. And the entire passage is a reminder of the choice we have to make as to where our ultimate security lies. In which kingdom do we put our trust? Do we trust in the temporary trappings of the kingdoms of this world? Or do we put our trust in the living God, whose kingdom endures for ever? The question we need to take away with us today is the following: Where will our friends and family and colleagues see us putting our trust? Will we live lives of consistent, open faithfulness to the living God who endures for ever? Will we point, metaphorically speaking, to Jerusalem rather than to Cambridge?

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.)