

Sermon for Trinity 18 2020

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. ¹⁷ 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.^[b] ¹⁸ 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." Daniel 3.16-18

As a child in Sunday School these accounts of the ancient believers made quite an impact on my brain. As a five year old I could not imagine why these three men would allow themselves to be thrown into a fire. More than this I was horrified that King Nebuchadnezzar would use his power to kill innocent people. The story made no sense to me.

The Sunday School teacher blathered on about Jesus going into the fire with them and no one was burnt, or hurt. As a five year old growing up in the country I knew all too well that fire was hot and that if I put my hand on the fireplace it would burn, and it would hurt. It is one of the first things that parents teach children when there are open fires and wood burning ovens. "Don't touch!"

These days I approach this account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from a different direction. Nebuchadnezzar is the main character. He is the one who is to learn from this exercise. It is him that God is trying to reach. The three Israelites are merely vehicles for the message to the King.

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that no one could interpret. In that dream there was a huge statue with a Golden head, the chest and arms were silver, its middle and thighs were bronze, and feet of clay and iron. It was Daniel who interpreted the dream. The golden Head was the current empire of Nebuchadnezzar, and, as the quality of the metal dropped from Gold to silver to bronze and then to iron, so did the power and influence of the empire diminish through the ages. The feet of clay and iron represented the division of the empire. The collapse of the statue in the dream marked the catastrophic collapse of the Empire. The one constant in all of this is the presence of God. The one true God, who is to be worshipped.

It is all very dramatic. In response to the interpretation Nebuchadnezzar set about creating an environment where there would be peace, harmony, and unity. He built the statue that featured in his dream, and demanded that everyone worship the gods of Babylon and the golden statue. He seemed to believe that if he could keep the whole population pointing in the one direction, there might not be a division of the kingdom. Everyone was to do the same thing, and they were to worship the same gods and they were to worship the Golden statue.

Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego were Israelites and as such would only worship the one true God. Because of their faith they would not comply with the king's demand that they worship a common statue. It is apparent from the reading tonight that they not only refused to comply; their behaviour, their disobedience, became an opportunity for the king to learn that he should also worship the one true God.

Nebuchadnezzar knew about the Israelite God. He knew, because Daniel had acknowledged God when he interpreted the dream for him. Daniel made it very clear that both the dream, and the interpretation of the dream, had come from their God. The one true God.

Nebuchadnezzar is now confronted with three Israelites who have chosen to disobey his command. What is he to do? He could accept their position and allow them to follow their own God; or, he could ignore them and hope that they went away; or, he could make an example of them in order to get his own way.

He chose the latter. He had the furnace heated up to seven times its original heat and the three disobedient Israelites were thrown into the flames.

In his rage Nebuchadnezzar directed his anger away from himself and onto others. Instead of humility before God he set out to inflict pain and damage on all the people around him. The first to suffer were the men who carried the three to the fire and threw them in. They died. His political ambition, his ego, placed his own staff at risk and they were killed.

It is a case of misplaced anger. How often have we seen this in our lives? How often have we flown off the handle and abused the person closest to us because some unfortunate event has happened? How often have teenagers abused their parents because they could not get their own way? How many people have we seen verbally attack the receptionist because the person we wish to see has become very busy and we will need to wait? Misplaced anger is very self-destructive. Anger robs us of reason. It stops us from being objective. It destroys compassion. Anger is the very opposite of love. It is often in anger that we will inadvertently create the most pain for the people we love.

It is misplaced anger that embraces Nebuchadnezzar. Instead of being reminded of the power of the one true God and turning towards God in humility, he attacked the people who are bringing him the message from the one true God. It is in a purple rage that he orders the death of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. It is pure rage that demands he watch them burn.

What he sees in the furnace is the continuation of the message that God is sending him. When he looks into the furnace he is perplexed because he can see a fourth person, and all four are walking around. When he looks into the furnace and is confronted by such a scene he is reminded of the faith of the three Israelites. He remembers that they had placed their faith in God and God would either protect them from the flames or he would not. Whatever the outcome, God would be with them and everything would be all right.

The final scene in this reading is that of Nebuchadnezzar finally understanding the power of the message that God had been sending him. He acknowledges the Israelite God *and* *“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 any god except their own God”*. He then made a decree that protected the faith, the religion if you like, from attack and blasphemy.

As I mentioned at the beginning this is not so much an account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as it is about God reaching out to Nebuchadnezzar. It is about the king recognising

God and then identifying and legitimising faith in God. it is about God continuing to care for his people, even though it may well have only been a remnant who would survive.

It is a message that if we place our trust in God there will be opportunities to speak of the trust, and there will be times when we will believe that no matter what happens, God will be near us to protect and care for us. This is the fundamental message of this reading. It is about God's love for his people. It is about God's love for us. It is about God's promise to never abandon us.