Seeking the Welfare of the City
Daniel 1:8-21

Recently I read an article that was trying to answer the question whether a confessing Christian should attend a same-sex wedding? And what struck me was that in his answer, the writer said, 'none of us want to be thought of as being a hater.' Because that's strong and cutting isn't it? You don't want to be known as a hater. And yet, today, it's increasingly likely that if you do take a stand for orthodox, historic Christianity, and the kind of morality that flows from that, you lay yourself open to just such a charge. You're a hater.

Now here, Daniel makes this stand over the issue of food and refused to compromise. But how can you refuse to compromise and stand against stuff that you know is wrong, and do that in a way that wins people rather than alienates them?

I mean, consider Daniel's situation. Here he is in Babylon, in a city whose culture and world-view are totally opposed to his own. A culture, much like our own, that worshipped idols that deified sex and power and wealth and war. Whereas, Daniel worshipped a God of holiness. And what you worship inevitably shapes how you live, doesn't it? It profoundly shapes what you become. Worship money or power or sex and you know the direction that society, or someone's life, will tend. Worship a God of holiness, and that will also set the course of your life, just in a very different direction.

So given how opposed the Babylonian world-view was to his own, why didn't Daniel refuse to co-operate full-stop, not just over food, but over study and work and serving the king as well? What was it that gave him the green light to stay in this idolatrous, God-denying system and participate and engage with it, rather than withdraw and throw grenades from behind the barricades? Because that's what he and his friends do, isn't it? Verse 20: 'Therefore they stood before the king.' At the end of their three years at the University of Babylon they graduate and Daniel comes out with the prize for distinction, and then proceeds to serve in the government in such a way that he rises to the top. But what gave him permission to do that? And to do that in a way that won the respect of others.

Well, I think we can have a fairly good idea why Daniel behaved as he did. And it's to do with the prophet Jeremiah back in Jerusalem.

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And in his book, Jeremiah records how, in the immediate aftermath of these young men being taken into exile, God gave him a vision. Jeremiah 24:1, 'The LORD showed me this vision: behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the LORD.' And one basket was filled with good figs, but the other with bad, so bad you couldn't eat them. And the shocking thing is that God tells Jeremiah that it was those carried off into exile in Babylon, people like Daniel, who were the good figs, and those left behind in Jerusalem who were the bad.

In other words, it wasn't Daniel and his mates down in Babylon who were under God's wrath, but those clinging on in Jerusalem. And during their time in Babylon, God promises to bless them and establish them. Now just think about that. Knowing that would have totally transformed how these young men saw

their time in Babylon, wouldn't it. That this city of idols was where God wanted them to be.

But with the deportations to Babylon in full swing, the prophet Jeremiah also wrote a letter to the exiles. This is what he wrote, Jeremiah 29:4-7: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters… multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

And that's why Daniel doesn't withdraw from a city and a culture whose world-view is totally opposed to his: because God cares about its welfare – and calls him to pray for and seek its welfare. And so for Daniel, to be in Babylon was to be a part of God's plan to bring salvation and blessing to the world. It was God saying to them: don't run away, don't turn your backs, whatever opposition you might face, don't be constantly looking over your shoulder, trying to get back to Jerusalem. Settle down there, live amongst them, and seek that city's welfare. For, v7, 'in its welfare is your welfare.' And it's knowing that God has plans for his welfare, that he was secure in him, that meant Daniel didn't have to withdraw but could seek others' good, even in the moral confusion of Babylon.

So, if Daniel's resolve not to eat the king's food tells us that we are most useful to God and of most blessing to the world, if we don't compromise, Daniel also teaches us that we can't hide away. And these young Jewish men combined risk taking faithfulness and holiness with involvement. It's the kind of thinking that lies behind Jesus' high-priestly prayer in John 17, when he says he's not going to pray that God would take us *out* of the world, but instead protect us *in* the world, that he might send us *into* the world.

And so as you and I find ourselves increasingly in our own cultural exile, we've also got to hear Jeremiah's message. That as we understand God has our welfare at heart, that we are secure in him, so we can seek the welfare of society. In fact, our welfare and theirs is inextricably linked. And like Daniel and his friends, that might involve years of unnoticed service or it might require us to stick our heads above the parapet and take what comes.

But how we do that – the tone in which we do that - matters crucially, doesn't it?

Winning Hearts as Well as Arguments

So how does Daniel do it? What's the tone of his protest?

Well, in taking his stand, Daniel goes first to the chief eunuch: v8, 'He asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.' He goes to the dean of undergraduate studies and asks for *permission* not to take the food. So, he doesn't make a big fuss, or stand on the dining tables, or organise a student sit in, or start a food fight. He does not even demand his human rights to be able to eat only broccoli and chickpeas! Instead it appears he goes to him in private, and asks him politely. He respects both the man and his authority.

But then look at the eunuch's response. It's fascinating: v10, 'And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king." So, even if just for a moment, this man's mask slips and he admits to Daniel that he's scared. And think about that, here is a man who's probably like many of your colleagues, who's living every day with fear hanging over him –what if I mess up today, what if my results aren't good enough, or I don't make my targets, what if my boss turns on me, what if a colleague makes a move against me, or stabs me in the back? And Daniel's suggestion just brings that all out into the open, because he fears the repercussions.

But how come he drops his guard and admits his fear like this? Well, we're told why. Verse 9: 'And God gave Daniel favour and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.' In other words, God opened this man's heart to Daniel. And when God gives you that kind of access into someone's heart, it's a great thing isn't it, it's a God-thing! But I don't think it's stretching it too far to say that for that to happen, Daniel has also had to allow God's grace to be at work in his own heart. You see, for people to open up to you, you have to be the kind of person, and display the kind of character, where people want to open up to you. There has to be this coming together of God's grace at work in their hearts, with his grace at work in your heart, making you gracious.

But sometimes as Christians we don't have that kind of reputation, do we? Instead, sometimes, we can have a reputation for being the opposite of gracious and gentle and respectful. I have a friend who worked for a small company where he was the only Christian, until a new manager came along. And this new man was very open about his Christian faith in the work-place. Except, the way he treated people didn't match his words. And my friend bravely took his senior colleague aside and said, 'look it's great you're so open. But your character desperately needs to match the gospel, or else you do more harm than good.'

But why is it that at times we can fail on gentleness and respect?

Firstly, when we think we know the truth it can make us arrogant and aggressive. When we think we're better than others, we can look down on them. So, just like Simon the Pharisee when the woman wept at Jesus feet at Simon's dinner party, we need Jesus to remind us that we're just as much a debtor, unable to pay, as the person we're criticising. Because, whereas religion can make us proud, grace humbles us. Whereas religion tells you, if you do this or that, you can be better than others. Grace tells us we are worse than we ever feared, but more loved than we ever hoped.

Secondly, when the pressure to conform is intense you can either buckle, *or* you can resist, and in that resistance you can become aggressive. And if we think we're losing the argument our tone can deteriorate and become defensive. And that's a failure of faith, a failure to remember that the battle is the Lord's, and the final outcome is certain, so why get aggressive or defensive?

Thirdly, we can forget that the person we're speaking to is made in the image of God, someone infinitely precious to God, one for whom Jesus died, but whom

satan has blinded. And if we're to seek the welfare of the city it's because God so loved the world that he gave his Son for it. So God's love for truth is not an arrogant love, is it? It's a humble, crucified love. A love that, like Jesus, is prepared to be ill-spoken of, and humiliated, and stripped of all dignity.

But we can never hope to communicate that love to those who need it, unless and until we know that love for ourselves. That though I am so needy, Christ loves me, and died for me.

So, refusing to conform to the world doesn't just mean not defiling ourselves by making a stand, it also means not defiling ourselves by attacking those who oppose us as the world attacks people. To be faithful to God in the middle of Babylon is not simply to draw a line in the sand, but to do so in a Christ-like way. As Peter says of Jesus in 1 Peter 2:23, 'when he was reviled he did not revile in return; when he suffered he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.' You see Jesus knew, and Daniel knew, that God is our judge, and when you know that you don't need to fear the judgement of others, but neither do you need to be judgmental.

Instead, we need to understand who our enemy actually is. Several years ago, Mark Noll, now professor at Notre Dame, wrote a book entitled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. And the scandal is that there isn't one, that most evangelicals don't think. And it's a scandal because the battlefield we find ourselves in is one of ideas – it's the battlefield of the mind.

Look at what Paul writes in 2 Cor 10:3-5: 'For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.'

So what are the strongholds Paul seeks to destroy? Arguments and opinions raised against God. And who are the prisoners he takes captive? Thoughts. So whilst Paul wages war, it's not against individuals, or by ad hominem attacks, but by reasoned argument. And in Acts we see him taking the battle of ideas to the realm of idols and what we worship, what our hearts love and give allegiance to.

But you can do all that and still get the tone wrong, can't you? Which is why Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15, 'Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it *with gentleness and respect*.' So when you're experiencing this clash of world-views, with someone in your family, or a friend on campus, or a colleague at work, ask yourself, am I gentle and respectful? - even when you fight hard for the truth. As Paul says in Colossians 4:5-6, 'Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.'

But to do that requires a deep love for Christ and a genuine love for our fellow man, rather than a point scoring mindset. And Daniel is a great example of that,

and his interactions here with the chief eunuch reveal something of where his inner poise comes from.

Inner Confidence, True identity
Look at verse 10, where Ashpenaz says, "I fear my Lord the king who assigned your food." In other words, to go along with Daniel's plans means to go against the king, which would be interpreted as treason. And the Eunuch's worried that if this gets out he'll be guilty by association. Verse 10, "So you would endanger my head with the king."

And yet, despite the fact that Daniel would be at just as much risk as the eunuch, he doesn't seem to be troubled by that same fear does he? So where does that gentle fearlessness come from? Well, as we saw last week, these young men were raised in King Josiah's court. And very likely part of the foundation laid in their lives was the book of Proverbs, written in particular for young men in the king's household. And Proverbs repeatedly tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, whilst the fear of man lays a trap. So, whilst Ashpenaz, the eunuch, feared the king, Daniel feared God. But Daniel's fear was a liberating fear. You see, if you share the eunuch's fear, the fear of what those in power will say of you, or do to you, it will hold you back from risking. Whereas Daniel's fear – this deep love for God that means you don't want to, you're afraid even, of sinning against him – frees you to risk and to challenge, because you don't need to fear the world when it's God you fear.

But then look at what else Ashpenaz says. Verse 10, "I fear my Lord the king… why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age?" So he's afraid that Daniel and co will *look* worse if he goes along with their plan. So for him this is about appearance, it's about image. And it was more than the chief eunuch's life was worth to have his students looking bad.

And yet, he knows of no other source of wellbeing than the king's food. He was such a part of the system, so much a child of his times, so used to swimming in Babylon's waters, that he couldn't imagine any other way. But Daniel knew that inner wellbeing – the kind of wellbeing that shines out - comes, not by eating the king's food, but having God as your lord and your identity rooted in him. It's to know that he's the one who defines you, not the world.

So, to thrive in exile as Daniel did, we need a commitment as robust as his and an inner confidence and an identity in Christ as sure as his.

But Ashpenaz didn't have that. So he doesn't give Daniel a 'yes', but neither does he give him a 'no'; instead he gives Daniel enough room to approach the steward. So, v11, 'Daniel said to the steward… "Test your servants for ten days…" And so Daniel suggests a clinical trial, it's probably the first ever controlled trial on record! Not, admittedly a randomised, double-blind, crossover trial, but a trial none the less. Give Daniel and his friends vegetables for 10 days, and everyone else the king's food, and then see who looks best.

The Favour of God

In the film, Chariots of Fire, Eric Liddle refuses to run on the Sabbath and just as he's about to run a race he hasn't trained for a fellow competitor presses a piece of paper into his hand. On it he's written 1 Samuel 3:30, where the Lord says, 'he who honours me, I will honour.'

And ultimately, that's the only honour that really matters, isn't it? But to get it, you have to die to wanting every other honour. That's what Eric Liddle did. It's what Daniel did; and so must we. In his book Mere Christianity, CS Lewis wrote, 'Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.'

You see living in the world, there is always going to be this pressure that Ashpenaz the eunuch feels – to get the honour of the world: the pressure of image, the pressure to look good, or keep your reputation intact, and to conform; to eat the king's food, and stay quiet, and keep your faith private. And if you don't, you risk being marginalised. But if you do – you risk losing the one thing in life that really matters: God as your supreme treasure. And Daniel and his friends were prepared to risk everything else to keep that treasure.

And God honours them. Verse 17, 'As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom.' It's the third 'And God gave…' in this chapter. And this one gives us the confidence not to run from the world; don't defile yourself, but don't check out either because you can be confident that God will act on your behalf. You see, if you're living to promote yourself, there can be no such confidence. But when you're living for Christ's glory – you can have huge confidence that God will give you what you need, when you need it.

And so Daniel writes, v18-20, 'At the end of the time… among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in his kingdom.' So God doesn't just give them wisdom, he also gives them favour with the king, he vindicates them.

And did you notice that he calls them by their Hebrew, not Babylonian names? It's a way of saying, look, it's God, not the Babylonian system, who has made us who we are. Nebuchadnezzar may have congratulated himself on the success of his educational system, you and I might have taken the credit for ourselves – I'm a self-made man! But Daniel knows better! This is God's doing, and Daniel and friends become better at the Babylonian game than the Babylonians themselves. It's God's subversive grace, as those led away into exile, the seeming losers, come out on top.

And yet… whilst this story ends happily, for now, that's not always the case is it? I mean, you can behave and speak graciously, you can genuinely seek the welfare of the city, and still be called a hater, can't you. And Daniel may keep his job, but maybe you, like others, will lose yours.

So how can we say that God will vindicate his people when often it doesn't seem that way?

Only when you know that this life is not all there is. You see, when it comes to the shifting sands of culture, and things like same sex marriage, or other controversial stuff, Christians can be accused of being on the wrong side of history, and maybe you worry about that. But listen, Jesus was also on the wrong side of history, or so it seemed. And they crucified him. But that's not how the story ended, is it.

After all, did you notice how chapter 1 finishes? Verse 21, 'And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.' Sixty-six years later. Now, why bring Cyrus into this? – he's years away. Well, firstly it tells you that by this time Daniel will be over 80, and he's still standing. Which should encourage you that a lifetime of faithful service to God, seeking the welfare of the city, is possible.

But secondly, it tells you that Babylon will fall. You see, Cyrus is not a Babylonian he's a Persian, who will conquer Babylon. And Nebuchadnezzar will pass from the scene – kings and presidents and cultural elites do – but God's kingdom endures. And the king and the worldview that seems at the moment to be so powerful, and on the ascendancy, has gone. But faithful, gracious Daniel, of the tribe of Judah, of the royal household, is still there. And when every other king is in his grave, Christ, of the line of David, of the tribe of Judah, will be the last left standing. And that's why you should choose not to defile yourself, that's why you should stay engaged and seek the city's welfare, and do so with grace. Because while you might worry about being on the wrong side of history, what you really need is a longer view of history.