Westlake Church Lausanne

Steadfast Faith in a Changing World
Introduction: Daniel 1:1-7

With the start of a new year, we're taking a break from the Gospel of Matthew, and instead, over the next couple of months, we're going to learn, I hope, from the experience of a number of people who lived 2500 years ago.

Now, you might hear that and think 'two and a half millennia? That's a long time ago'. And you'd be justified for wondering if there are any meaningful parallels between life then and now. But we're going to be looking at two old Testament books. Firstly the book of Daniel, and then the book of Esther. And Daniel and Esther were two very different people, but they experienced what it was to live as people of faith in a world radically different from that which they had grown up in, or that they were prepared for. It was a world where they found themselves outsiders, where their faith set them apart as strange, or even where their faith was used as a weapon against them. A world where the prevailing ideas and values and culture were not just at odds with their own, but hostile and antagonistic to it.

In other words, they experienced what many of us have or are beginning to experience as we live out the Christian faith, or as we investigate it.

And yet Daniel and Esther managed to navigate their way in such a world, and did so in such a way that they gained the respect of their peers, served their societies with distinction, used their God-given gifts and positions with skill, and did it all without compromising their faith.

At least Daniel did. But if you know the book, you'll know that for Esther it didn't start out that way. For a while it looked as if Esther was going to be lost to the culture, and be consumed by it – and yet, as we'll see, despite the pull of the surrounding culture on her life, Esther matures into this striking woman of faith.

So these two weren't stained glass saints. And as we'll see, neither of them are the ultimate heroes of the stories that bear their names. That place is reserved for God. And that's a really helpful reminder, that even in our narcissistic age you and I are not the heroes of our own stories. You see, as we read their stories, what becomes evident is that God does not bring about deliverance or display his power in response to their courage or integrity. Rather it is God's faithfulness and his working out his plans and purposes, very obviously in Daniel but seemingly invisibly in Esther, that gives Daniel and Esther the ground in which their faithfulness and works of service could flourish.

So they weren't stained glass saints. But they were real men and women living out a real world faith, in a volatile, changing and, sometimes, hostile world. Which is what you and I are called to do.

But of course the relevance of their stories isn't limited to cultural or geopolitical changes in the world, is it? The hard truth is that your world, your life can change profoundly and it not cause so much as a ripple in the wider world. Your life can

be turned upside down by events or circumstances outside of your control while others' lives carry on regardless. Well, how can you walk with God when your world has been rocked like that?

Well, that's the sort of stuff for which Daniel and Esther are excellent guides. And we're going to start with Daniel.

Daniel 1:1-7

Now, this morning we're not going to look in depth at this passage, or the book as a whole, we'll start that next week. Instead, today I want to give you the background to what goes on here. So firstly, we're going to look at faith in Exile then; then we'll see the relevance for this for you and me – faith in exile, now and then briefly, we're going to look at three different possible reactions to a changing world.

Faith in Exile – Then*: Judah in Exile*
So Daniel begins his book by saying, v1, 'In the third year of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchandnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.' So the year is 605BC and beginning then, and in the years that followed, the Babylonian Empire conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, and forcibly took her inhabitants away into exile.

But events like that don't happen in a vacuum, do they? I mean, Hitler did not wake up one morning and decide to invade Poland. There was build up to that event. And the same was true for the fall of Jerusalem. And simply put, this catastrophic event in the life of God's people happened because of Judah's refusal to heed the message of the prophets and repent. You see, when in Deuteronomy the Lord set out the covenant with his people, there where blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience; and the ultimate curse, the ultimate negative outcome for the people if they refused to keep the covenant, was exile from the land: Deut 28:63-64, 'And you shall be plucked off the land… and the Lord will scatter you among all peoples.'

Now, if you're a parent or a teacher, think for a moment about how you respond to wrong behaviour. Having something to *say* about something and *doing something* about it, are not always the same thing, are they! And the prophets made clear that God is not neutral towards human behaviour. He has something to say about it. But, he also does something about it. The Bible teaches us that he judges it, even when that judgement might be delayed.

Now, Judah did what you and I tend to do, and that's judge ourselves against our own standards. And the people heard the words of the prophets, looked at their lives and thought 'nah, there's no problem, we're doing ok'. The problem is, that's not the standard God uses.

And speaking in the build-up to the fall of Jerusalem, God called the people through the prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 22, to, "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow… But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation… because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God and worshipped other gods and served them." (Jer 22:3, 5, 9).

But if the words of the prophets were like traffic lights, warning the people to change course, as a nation Judah drove straight through the lights, and as a result the curses of the covenant came crashing down upon them – culminating in exile. It's the danger of thinking that God has a special plan for you, or your nation, and so it doesn't matter how you behave. It's the danger of moral complacency and spiritual pride.

But if judgment and exile made moral sense, viewed from the outside, that doesn't mean they would have made sense to those who lived through it. I mean, imagine a pagan nation conquering God's people; and God's people being forcibly deported from the land promised to Abraham; and the treasures of the Temple being taken as trophies to pagan temples. This would have undermined everything their world-view was built on – that God was the one with all the power, that no enemy could stand before him, that they were his people, that this was his city. So sure Babylonian conquest and exile made moral sense, but it would still have been deeply traumatic, and especially for faithful Israelites like Daniel and his friends who had to go through it.

I mean, think about when you have gone through turbulent times in your own life. With hindsight you can say, 'ah that's what God was up to, now I understand'. But that's with hindsight. It's another thing altogether to know that in the heat of the moment, when you're caught up in it, isn't it. Then things can seem to make very little sense.

And yet, as we're going to see, young men like Daniel became beacons in the dark night of exile. And they came to understand that it wasn't just global history and the rise and fall of nations that God is interested in, but the lives and histories of them as individuals. And in the trauma of exile, in a world turned upside down, their faith shone.

And the question is, why? What did they understand about faith and life that meant they could live and serve in a deeply pagan environment and manage to gain respect, and prosper, and be promoted, and yet do so without even a whiff of compromise? And when we get to Esther, and it seems like God is absent and no longer shows up, how can faith flourish when that's the case?

Well, that's what we're going to be looking at over the next few weeks.

But why bother studying what they went through? Because, like them, you and I are having to learn what it is to live out our faith in a rapidly changing world, where the old certainties are fast disappearing.

Faith in Exile - Now: *The Church in Exile*

So, fast-forward from the Babylonian Empire of the 6th Century BC, to the 21st Century West. And increasingly, as Christians, we too find ourselves in a position of exile. And I want to explain why.

In the West what we're witnessing is a growing separation of faith and public life, where orthodox, historic Christian faith is pushed to the margins and increasingly excluded from the public square. And this move is driven by three things.[1] It's driven by cultural pluralism, where the exclusivism of the gospel is no longer tolerated; it's driven by secularism, where atheism has become more and more strident, and argues that faith is a private matter and should not be discussed in public; and thirdly it's driven by political correctness – where anything that might offend is deemed off-limits.

And to give you some examples of these trends, speaking in 1994 at the Salk Institute, Steven Weinberg, the American physicist and Nobel Laureate said that the best contribution scientists could make in this generation was the complete elimination of religion.[2] Twenty years later, in 2013, a prominent US pastor, who had been slated to give the benediction and prayer at President Obama's inauguration, was cut from the program because people objected to his views that homosexuality was sinful and gay marriage should be opposed.[3]

More recently, there have been a number of cases where the concept of 'safe space' has closed down the discussion of ideas on campuses that others deem controversial. Only last year, Larry Summers, the former president of Harvard University warned of 'Creeping Totalitarianism' on campuses, prompted by the refusal of some law departments in the US to teach rape law because it might offend some students; or in the UK, the feminist Germaine Greer was banned from speaking at Cardiff University because she refuses to accept that transgender women are really women.

Now, those two cases are not explicitly about faith, but they are about what happens when prevailing views are challenged. And as an example of that impinging on faith, I was recently talking to a young Dutch Christian, whose Christian Union group back in the Netherlands had just been told that all financial support by the university was to stop with immediate effect. Political groups, sports clubs, groups based on sexual identity, would all continue to

---

[1] John Lennox, *Against the Flow: the Inspiration of the Daniel in an Age of Relativism* (Oxford: Monarch, 2015), 1.
[2] Lennox, 2.
[3] JR Vassar *Glory Hunger: God, the Gospel, and our Quest for Something More* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 104.

receive funding, but not the CU. It was their way of saying, religion has no place on campus. Nearer to home, in 1559 John Calvin founded what is now Calvin's College in Geneva - the first secondary school in Switzerland. At the entrance is a stone engraving of Proverbs 1:7, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.' But now, 458 years later, the Christian Union faces opposition to meeting on its premises or handing out Bibles.

Tom, who for those of you who don't know is a professor and dean at the EPFL, has regularly given a talk to students on combining science and faith. And one of the reasons behind that talk is the claim made by a professor of Chemistry at Oxford, that it's impossible to be a *real* scientist and a person of faith. But that that point needs to be challenged, tells us something of the world we live in.

Then there has been the use of the courts to penalise Christian hoteliers, or bakers, or photographers, or florists, or registrars of marriages, for taking a stance on same-sex marriage.

Now, whatever one thinks of individual cases, I don't think anyone can see the current direction of travel of our societies and think that it is anything but increasingly difficult to walk the other way, or swim against the flow, or speak against the cultural zeitgeist. And the combined outcome of all these is a chilling effect on public discourse.

And so, increasingly, we find ourselves, like Daniel and his friends, living in a world where the old certainties are gone. Where our faith appears to be on the backfoot, where pagan culture and thinking holds sway, where a Christian view of what constitutes marriage, or best facilitates human thriving, or the place of modesty, or integrity, or care for the suffering and the dying, are all being challenged or undermined or abandoned. As Paul Tabori, the Hungarian writer puts it, we are experiencing what it is to be 'inner exiles', outcasts within our own countries.[4]

Now, that we are where we are has multiple causes. But at least in some way, when like Israel the church, or us as individual Christians, has failed to be different, when we have been more moulded by the surrounding culture than serving as a light to the nations, when we have served the gods of money, or power, or influence, or status, thinking that that's where we'll find significance, rather than God, then I don't think it's stretching it too far to say that, just like Israel, that has contributed to our lack of spiritual power and a growing sense of exile.

And yet, none of this is a reason to descend into unhelpful navel gazing!

[4] Quoted in Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope after Christendom*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 21.

Instead, when you look at the state of society, and the church, remember that Christ came for a lost world, and for people like us who have failed to live as we should; for people like us who get ensnared into giving stuff other than God the ultimate place in our lives. And fortunately, ultimately the power of the gospel and the strength of the church is not dependent on you and me getting it right, but on God. And when Jesus was led outside the city walls to be crucified, he was being sent into exile for us. And when he cried out 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me', he was experiencing the judgement and the god-forsakenness of exile so that you and I never need face it. And it's in the light of his grace and forgiveness that you and I can decide to live in our day in faithful obedience to him.

You see, if you're a thoughtful Christian, the sheer speed of change in society, and the intellectual dismissal of Christianity, can cause you to question whether you're right to believe in God and his truth, when everyone else seems to say otherwise.

And yet, this is nothing new, is it? I mean, there have been periods in history, even British and European history, where to be a confessing Christian could cost you your life. So our spiritual forebears *really* knew what it was to have a faith that endured.

And so a steadfast Christian faith is never an excuse to become nostalgic for some non-existent golden age – and 'if only we could turn the clock back'. Throughout history there have always been periods of cultural or societal exile for God's people, when faith must be lived out in an unbelieving or pagan environment, and each time such times have provided wonderful opportunities for the flourishing of faith.

After all, think of the words of Jeremiah the prophet, from Jeremiah 29:11. They're the sort of Bible verse you stick on your fridge: 'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.' Those are great words, aren't they? But what you may not recall is that Jeremiah wrote those words under the shadow of exile, with life-wrecking and world-overturning events at the door. And they're embedded in a passage (Jer 29:10-14) that speaks of God carrying the people off into exile for 70 years, but that that will be the catalyst for the people to cry out to God. And in their distress they will seek God and find him, and he will once more restore them. That in all the trauma of exile, and their world turned upside down, God is working out his plans for their good.

You see, whilst there may be times when you are tempted to doubt whether God has plans and purposes for you or your welfare, the Bible never has any such doubt. When the Bible writers speak of God being in control of history, and the rise and fall of nations, they never lose sight that God also cares for his people, as

a people and as individuals. And even our seemingly meaningless lives he weaves into the tapestry of his one great design.

And it is faith in that God, who has every detail under control, that prompted Spurgeon, the great Victorian preacher to say, "I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes – that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens – that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence – the fall of . . . leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche."

And it is a faith that is rooted in this unchanging, sovereign God, who knows what he is doing, that can enable you and me to live with faith in a changing world.

But my question is, will we?

Three Different Reactions

You see, I think there are a number of possible reactions or responses to a world that is increasingly opposed to the gospel:

Firstly, you could retreat into a Christian ghetto. And without wanting to sound sectarian, this is the danger of fundamentalism. And you begin to see the lost as your enemy. You become a cultural warrior, but your tone is harsh and you display little in the way of love for those you critique. And, as a result, people increasingly ignore your voice. They see little in the way of love or winsomeness that would attract them or persuade them that the gospel really is good news.

Or, secondly, you become indistinguishable from the world, and the world shapes you. And this is the error of many of the main line, liberal denominations. And the danger there is that you see fundamentalists as your enemy. But in doing so the prophetic voice of the church, calling people to faith and repentance is lost, and the church tries to do what the world does, only it can't do it nearly as well and just becomes an irrelevance.

But the third option is that you and I become missional. That this exile leads us home and brings us back to who God's people are always meant to be, that we see ourselves as strangers in the world, who are looking for another city with foundations, whose builder is God, but in doing so we don't withdraw from the world. Instead, as we live here, we do so rooted in the gospel and the historic Christian faith. And here, we see sin and the principalities and powers as the enemy. And we call all to repentance, and extend the grace of Jesus' gospel, and we live and we serve and do all we can for genuine human flourishing, whilst clearly, but winsomely, calling people into God's kingdom.

And it's the gospel that can give you the courage to live like that, with faith and integrity, and to make a stand if necessary. You see, there is never any suggestion in the Bible that it will ever be anything but deeply challenging to live as a Christian in a changing and hostile world. As we'll see next week, the book of Daniel opens with an account of God's sovereignty – that this Exile was his doing. But that doesn't mean Daniel had a holiday in Babylon.

You see, when God promises that he has plans to prosper and not to harm, there's almost an assumption there that sometimes life will look like harm, isn't there? And in Matthew 10 when Jesus says, 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell' (Matt 10:28-31), Jesus is assuming that if you're his follower, you will face opposition and reasons for fear.

But whilst opposition and reasons to fear may come, you can see them through a different lens, and it's the lens of the gospel and, in particular, the resurrection. The British theologian CFD Moule said that the gospel rips a great hole in history – a hole the size and shape of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.[5] And if the resurrection is true, if death is not the end of the story, then it totally changes how you see adversity and opposition in this life.

If this other world exists – that Jesus' resurrection has punched a way through to, then to live your life as if this was all there is, would be madness, no matter how challenging it will be, to live otherwise. But in living otherwise, as we're going to see, Daniel and Esther, are great guides.

[5] Lennox, 23.