

Pako Morning Service 18/11/2016

Readings: 1 Peter 1:1-12; Daniel 2:1–23; Message “The almost impossible dream”

Congregation, I think from time to time, we all dream dreams. Interestingly, scientists, brain surgeons if you will, still don't know what causes human beings to dream. But we all dream, sometimes we remember sometimes we don't. Sometime the dreams make some sense, sometimes that just too stupid for words. And sometimes, we know we have dreamed a dream, but we cannot remember!

Here in Chapter 2, we are faced with a real bazaar request from king Nebuchadnezzar to his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and the Chaldeans. The King has had a bad night's sleep. Matter of fact, he's been dreaming, but now he cannot remember his dream.

Now if that were to occur to us, we would probably dismiss it and move on. However, in the ancient world, dreams were thought to be a sign of what lay ahead. Hence it was very important for the king to not only know and understand the dream, but also that he could take the necessary action to avoid a bad outcome, or conversely, exploit a good outcome.

That's why the king demanded from his specialist team, if we can call them that, to make his dream known and to interpret it. That's what the magicians, enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans were paid for. And if they couldn't do it then they and all the wise men of Babylon would be killed, which of course included Daniel and his three friends.

So this specialist team comes along and they open with the usual opening line, “O King live forever.” That was the smart thing to say. You would dare not say, “O king, we hope you die soon!” Now they may have wished they said the latter, once they knew what the King was asking them to do. The king's demand was unreasonable to say the least and they soon realized that their material wealth would be little more than a pile of rubble and their own days were numbered by this ridiculous request.

In their defense, they weren't prophets, and they soon tell the king, “There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks! No one can show it to the King except the gods whose dwelling is not with flesh.” Well that may be true, but it doesn't appease the king's anger. So the king orders the execution of all the wise men of Babylon, even those not present (v12), a little bit over the top we would suggest. More than that we would say he has a screw loose or he has lost his marbles!

The bad news reaches Daniel, when he asks Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, why the king has issued such a harsh decree. When Daniel hears the answer, he goes to the king and that he might be given more time to know the dream and to interpret it for him. And it was granted.

Daniel is to be commended for he knew that what the king demanded was beyond that of mortal man. And so Daniel goes to his house and asks his three friends to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that they might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. And God answered their prayer by revealing to Daniel the dream in a vision during the night. And Daniel responds in praise and thanksgiving. He breaks out in song (Dan 2:14–19).

But this episode was not simply to show Nebuchadnezzar the future through this dream, but to demonstrate clearly the difference between Daniel and the rest of the wise men of Babylon, and between his God and their gods. All of a sudden, this story provides the context for God to display publicly his power.

So in this story we have come to the first instance where Daniel's life is threatened. No doubt, much of Daniel's life was probably very mundane as ours are. Not every day or for that matter every year is packed with life threatening situations. And this book too is an account of seventy odd years of Daniel's life, so not all these things happened at once. Interestingly, some of the most difficult periods in Daniel's life are recorded, not least that he needed to live in a foreign land. Hence to remain faithful to his God would have been particularly demanding.

Yet, it is during these particular times that we see the hand of the Lord being very close to Daniel, working in and through his life in a special way. Indeed, the same is true in our own lives as well. Usually the best times to show we are Christians and hence different from the world around us is when we go through difficulties, whether it be sickness or even worse. Someone I spoke to recently said that at our age, when you have an ache or pain, you quickly start to wonder what it could be? I said to him, just as well, otherwise we may conclude that we have no need of God in our lives.

The Apostle Peter reminds us that trials come so that our faith which is of greater worth than gold, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:7). In this chapter, God puts on display the difference between Daniel and those around him. In fact, the triumph of Daniel's wisdom provided by God over the wisdom of the Babylonians is the primary point of this chapter, emphasizing what we previously saw in Chapter 1. We were reminded in Chapter 1 that the king had found Daniel and his three friends ten times better than all the others because of God's blessing. I want you to also notice God's blessing on Daniel in this chapter.

In the first place, God showed his power and blessing on Daniel by granting him initial favour before King Nebuchadnezzar. When the king's wise men asked the king to tell them his dream the king accuses them of wasting his time for he had already told that he didn't know and wanted them to tell him the dream (2:7-9). Yet when Daniel asked for extra time to interpret the dream, he is not accused of wasting the king's time or prolonging the inevitable, but he receives what he asked from the king.

And then Daniel goes home and along with his three friends prays for mercy and that God would give him an answer to what Nebuchadnezzar dreamed and how to interpret it. Again, what an exemplary thing to do. We human beings are not so good at depending entirely of God. So often God and prayer are the last resort. Only when all human means of support are gone, we might think to commit things to God in prayer.

But who could be better to turn to in a time of trial? Who is like the Lord as a helper and deliverer? Yes, sometimes he doesn't deliver us from our trials in the way that he delivers Daniel and his friends. Sometimes he delivers us by walking through the fiery trial with us, rather than saving us out of it (cf. Hebrews 11). In this case, however, the Lord answered Daniel's prayer by revealing the mystery to him (Dan. 2:19).

Yet Daniel did not immediately rush off to Nebuchadnezzar with the answer. Even with his life in the balance, Daniel took the time to give thanks to God for the answer he had received. Again, an exemplary thing to do. So often we pray passionately for a deliverance from our trials, but when that deliverance comes, we fail to return our thanks to God. Like nine out of ten of the lepers healed by Jesus (Luke 17:12-19), we go on our way rejoicing that our problems are solved and forget to thank the very one who provided.

Not so Daniel. He takes the time to praise God for the awesome deliverance he has received before he brings the answer to the king. Now having mentioned some application let me just zero in a little more. First, as I said last week, although we can learn from Daniel, we're not Daniels. Who of us is going to say we are ten times wiser and smarter than the next guy. So where are we to find that wisdom for our own lives?

The Lord has revealed that wisdom to us in his Word, the Bible. We don't need to flounder around seeking to piece together our own wisdom when we have this book. We don't need to be able to interpret strange dreams. Instead, we need to prayerfully dive into its depths and ponder its profundity. We need to store it in our hearts and treasure its riches.

Oh, this is nothing new, but it is good to be reminded. For in practice, even as Christians, we often live our lives according to the wisdom of the world. If we pursued God's wisdom with half of the enthusiasm with which we seek to progress in the world, we would be much wiser than we are. If we spent even half the passion on seeking God that we spend on seeking amusement, or scrawling through Facebook, our lives would be far different from those of the people around us.

If we pursue God's wisdom with a passion, then we too, like Daniel, will be distinct from the culture around us, and we will be better able to give those around us the answer to questions that are beyond them. People around us may not be having the same dreams as Nebuchadnezzar, but they are nonetheless regularly faced with questions they cannot answer. "Why am I here? What happens to me when I die? How should I live in this world?"

The wisdom of the world cannot answer these deep questions. Only the wisdom of the world's Creator, found in Scripture can answer those questions. Therefore, like Daniel, thank and praise God for the richness of his word to us. Treasure it and share it with your neighbours when they are puzzled. Objectively, God's word tells me who God is and who I am, what I should believe about him, and how I should please him.

Subjectively, it gives us some clues on how to bring the good news of Jesus Christ. It gives me insight on how to love my wife and children and my fellow brother and sister in Christ! It helps me to prioritise life and work and entertainment and kingdom work. It gives me a peace that passes understating. Daniel recognized that God is able to guide indirectly through circumstances and, in this unique case, by dreams and visions as well as directly through the Word. We cannot be taught these things. They come to us when we spend time in God's word and prayer.

Second, magicians, the enchanters, and the Chaldean respond to the king in v11; “The thing the king asks is difficulty and no one can show the king except the gods whose dwelling is not with flesh.” If Daniel had not turned to prayer and the One True God had not intervened, all the wise men of Babylon would have died at the hand of the King. Thankfully, God heard Daniel’s prayer and answered favourably. God did not just remain in heaven and let Daniel find his own way.

And we know, that God became flesh and made his dwelling among us, the glory of the one and only true God (John 1:14). He came and lived the perfect life of wisdom and obedience to God’s Word, or if you will to His Father in heaven. In some ways the same as Daniel, and yet in other ways far beyond Daniel. Daniel, his three friends and all the wise men were spared for God intervened. Jesus on the other hand, the only one without sin, was not delivered. Even though he brought his inner cabinet along with him to pray for him at that hour of trial, they slept and Jesus was all alone.

Yet even though the horror of the cross caused him to sweat drops of blood, he could still pray, “Lord, your will be done” and the cross became reality for him. Jesus knew, that through his death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection, God the Father would redeem for himself a holy people that would be his for all eternity. In other words, no execution for us anymore.

Later on in the chapter we read that King Nebuchadnezzar paid some homage to Daniel’s God. We don’t know what all the other wise men did with their stay of execution. It’s not that important. The more important point is what we will do with our stay of execution. How do we respond to the news that, what was impossible for us, God has made possible through his Son? How do we respond to the news that someone has come to bear our sins and to give us the righteousness we need to stand before a holy God as a free gift? In short, repent and believe and give thanks! Break out and sing, for it is the best news. Abandon your love affair with the gods of this world.

Repent, believe and give thanks. Everything come to us from our Father’s hand and therefore are never meaningless. As we said earlier with the children, we are not called upon to give thanks to God for all thing, but in all things. The only way to be able to do that is to remember that God become flesh and dwelt among us in His Son. The sovereign God is not distant or uncaring, nor is he powerless to deliver us. In fact, he is closer now than ever before, for he lives in our hearts with his Holy Spirit. Now that’s something to sing about! Amen.