

Pako Morning Service 9/10/2016

Reading: Daniel 4; Message "God's love towards the prideful"

Congregation, we are familiar with the saying, "Pride comes before the fall." It finds its origin in Scripture. Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." And for much of Daniel 4, that is what we are dealing with. However, there is a deeper underlying issue in this chapter, namely, "Who is the ultimate king?" Thankfully, Daniel chapter four leaves us in no doubt about Who that is and it isn't king Nebuchadnezzar, just in case you are wondering. Interestingly, this chapter starts with a doxology, then Nebuchadnezzar dream and its interpretation, and then except for a few concluding verses ends with a hymn of praise. King Nebuchadnezzar wishes to tell everyone about how great God is and what he has experienced at the hand of the Most-High God. Sometimes we do the same thing. Something will happen in our lives and we will say to people, "God is great or God is good" and when we ask the person why they then give you a history of what happened that has led them to that point.

Now some commentators suggest that king Nebuchadnezzar is referring to the deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace in the previous chapter. However, there is a key difference here, for king Nebuchadnezzar speaks of signs and wonders that the Most-High God has performed for *him* (4:2). And this personal experience in Nebuchadnezzar's life is what we see in Daniel 4. We are told that Nebuchadnezzar although initially at ease and prosperous in his palace, had another dream which disturbed him. And as in Chapter two, the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans and the astrologers came in but they had no clue. And then lastly, Daniel comes in. Although, named Belteshazzar after Nebuchadnezzar's own god, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that Daniel has the spirit of the holy God within him.

And so the King tells him his dream about the huge tree which was visible to all the earth. It produced fruit for all; shade for the beasts; a perch for the birds and all flesh ate from it. But then a voice from heaven calls out that the tree should be cut down. The branches are trimmed, the fruit scattered, the birds and animals flee and all that is left is this stump. This stump is going to be bound by iron and drenched with the dew of heaven, and it will have the mind of an animal, surviving by eating the grass in the field for seven years.

Upon hearing the dream, we read that Daniel was "dismayed for a while and his thoughts alarmed him" (v19). And why not? The Lord had revealed to him the meaning of the dream and it was all bad news for the king who has the power to harm him. But Nebuchadnezzar reassures him not to be alarmed. So Daniel explains that the tree represented Nebuchadnezzar and his vast kingdom, but that is where the good news ended. The divine tree cutter was going to bring this tree down! It will no longer be seen as glorious and influential.

In fact, Nebuchadnezzar would not only lose his power and glory, but his very humanity would be removed from him. The king who thought he was 'god' and the centre of the universe will become like a beast so that he can learn who the ultimate King really is. But there is some light at the end of tunnel. The stump and its roots are to remain, for when the king acknowledges that heaven rules the kingdom will be restored (v26).

Notice also that God allowed room for repentance in v27, "Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity." If Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself, then God would not need to further humble him. If he did not repent, however, then he would find out who is really in control of the universe. Sadly, the warning of the dream went unheeded by the king.

A whole year goes by, during which Nebuchadnezzar had plenty of opportunity to repent and to not just give lip service and acknowledge the Most-High God as he had previously done, but to show it by practicing righteousness and showing mercy to the oppressed. Perhaps he thought it was a veiled threat! But it wasn't. One day as the king was taking great pride in his kingdom, it all came to pass. While he was boasting about his mighty power, his glory and majesty, he was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird (Dan. 4:33). Oh, how the mighty fall and Nebuchadnezzar's fall was complete. For seven years he lived as a wild beast.

Now some people speculate that Nebuchadnezzar had a mental illness or some other psychological problem. Whatever it was, his sickness was a direct judgment of God, not a naturally occurring phenomenon. Finally, at the end of God's appointed time of judgment, Nebuchadnezzar raised his eyes to heaven and his mind was restored. How ironic. At the beginning he is looking horizontally at his vast kingdom, from his lofty position. Full of pride. I guess that is what pride does. It always looks down on everyone else, and exalts self.

All of a sudden self becomes the centre of everything, always comparing ourselves with others, and endlessly trying to outdo them, whether it be in skill, looks, sport or whatever. When hearts are full of pride, there is no room for looking upward. But when Nebuchadnezzar lifted his eyes to heaven, his reason, his sanity if you like, returned to him. King Nebuchadnezzar came to realize, that he and his previously majestic kingdom was nothing more than dust on the scales as far as God was concerned. The Most-High God is sovereign in all he does and no one, not even the once mighty king Nebuchadnezzar can challenge Him. And so now realising this, Nebuchadnezzar honours and blesses God, the one who lives forever. And Nebuchadnezzar is restored and his former kingdom is returned to him and he even becomes greater. But this time, at least as far as we know, he continues to praise and extol the king of heaven for the remainder of his days.

Now remembering that Daniel wrote during the time of the exile, this was an important message for Israel to hear. The imagery of the once-proud tree that had been reduced to a mere stump spoke to their situation just as much as it did to Nebuchadnezzar's. Israel as a nation took their eyes off God. They too, were guilty of forgetting the true God. They too failed to obey his good laws and turned to idols and neglected the poor and oppressed. And God sent them into exile. They like Nebuchadnezzar, just paid God some cheap lip service but didn't do what he asked them to do. And so the judgment king Nebuchadnezzar experienced, was experienced by Israel itself.

Israel itself was like a tree that had been cut down and destroyed, until only the stump remained. Isaiah 6:13 is fulfilled, which stated that the message Isaiah had to bring would ensure that only a stump remained. Israel was also a nation that prided themselves on not needing God anymore. They also needed to be brought low. Yet Nebuchadnezzar's experience could also be a source of hope for them. If Nebuchadnezzar could be forgiven and restored when he humbled himself and repented and looked to the Lord, then Israel too could be forgiven and restored. The Lord's promise to Solomon after the dedication of the temple gives similar hope. "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chr 7:14). If, in the midst of the devastating experience of their exile, the Israelites took the lesson to heart and humbled themselves before the Lord, they could expect to see his favour shown to them once again.

This looking away from oneself to heaven is the essence of true humility. True humility recognizes that all the inhabitants of the earth are nothing, and that God is everything. Daniel's interpretation of the dream should have been a humbling message for Nebuchadnezzar. The same is true for us, for the gospel message is an intrinsically humbling message. The only way for us to enter God's kingdom is with empty hands, lifting our eyes to heaven and confessing our desperate need of a Saviour. And although we may not like to admit it, there is probably a bit of Nebuchadnezzar in all of us when it comes to our pride. It's hard to be humble all the time! Pride and self is always close.

Sometimes we are tempted to survey our lives and achievements, and take a little pride in what we have achieved. We may even inwardly be thinking, compared to others around us, we have done pretty well. However, when we stand in front of God, our problem is not just our weaknesses and failures, it is also our successes and our strengths if we take pride in them. I would suggest that pride is one of the major obstacles for missions. The devil makes people believe they are pretty good and don't need a Saviour. That's why the gospel becomes offensive to them. How often don't we hear it, "I have led a good life. I've been good to my neighbour, helped the poor, donated money to worthy causes!" And if this pride continues, it doesn't take long before people think God owes them and their reward of heaven and eternal life is their due.

Thankfully, God in his infinite wisdom and grace knows how to bring us down a peg or two when needed. In his love and concern for our eternal welfare, he may bring financial hardship or serious sickness to make us realise that we cannot do it on our own, but need Him and what he has done for us in Christ. Maybe we should be more thankful for adversity than we are. I dare say that if none of the above ever occurred to us, we would soon find we have no need of God or His Son. The worst thing that can happen to us would be for the Lord to leave us comfortable and at ease in our pride.

The prodigal son only realized his need of God after he had lost everything. Without the episode in the pigsty, the prodigal would never have gone home. So too, a deeply humbling experience of failure or sin can be the means by which God brings about a profound transformation in our hearts and a fresh understanding of the gospel. But why should our God show favour to the humble?

The answer takes us to another king who was brought down from far greater heights than Nebuchadnezzar ever was. In fact, this King could have looked out over his kingdom and said, "Look what I have made – what power and glory and majesty it shows. And he would have been perfectly legitimate to say so. Yet instead of exalting himself, this king voluntarily humbled himself. Nebuchadnezzar went to dwell with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and did what beasts and birds were created to do! Jesus left the comforts and glories of heaven and came to dwell on earth

amongst sinful humanity. This king took on himself the form of a servant. He healed the sick and preached to the poor, set the prisoner free and even washed the feet of his disciples. He carried this servant's form all the way to a criminal's death on the cross, even though he had done nothing wrong (Phil. 2:6–8). Yet this king's humbling was not forced upon him because of his pride. On the contrary, it was a voluntary choice on his part so that he might redeem us from our pride. The one who by rights could legitimately have exalted himself made himself lower than the angels in order to redeem a people for himself.

This humble King's time of humiliation is over and now he is once again exalted in glory. This Jesus is the one to whom our doxology and worship is directed this very day, the one in heaven to whom our eyes are lifted in adoration and praise. Sometimes we jokingly take pride in our humility, but show me a truly humble Christian and I will show you one who has their eyes firmly fixed on their Saviour. Our pride, self exaltation, beating our own drum, disappears when our eyes are fixed on Jesus.

The glory of his majesty as the uncreated Creator reminds us of our smallness as created beings. He is the real tree of life, the true center of the universe, the one in whom and for whom all things exist, the one in whom all must come to find refuge. What have we accomplished compared to him? In view of the incredible mercy we have received, how can we ever boast in anything except the cross of Christ?

As we contemplate Christ, once humbled and now exalted, we are reminded over and over of the profound fact that the only thing we contribute to our salvation is our utter depravity. Yet at the same time we are also reminded that we are far more loved than we ever dared to hope. Do you have trouble with pride? Take your eyes off yourself and your accomplishments. Do you have trouble with despair? Take your eyes even off your failures and disasters. Stop comparing yourself with others.

Instead, lift your eyes heavenward and look to Christ, the humbled and exalted King. His death and resurrection are the means by which you are restored to your senses and made welcome in the most exalted company, heaven itself. Revel in the extraordinary riches of God's mercy and grace to you. What a great reason to worship. Amen.