

Pako Morning Service 23/10/2016

Reading: Mat 22:1-44; Daniel 5; Message “When the writing is on the wall – take note”

Congregation, let me say three things at the start. When someone says to you that the writing is on the wall, it is a reference to Daniel five, but it also means the end is near and inevitable, even death as was the case with Belshazzar. Second, when your knees start knocking because you're scared stiff, that also finds its origin in Daniel five, as we see with Belshazzar. And a third thing to learn from this chapter is that God is King and deserves our worship.

In Daniel five we see that things have moved along. King Nebuchadnezzar has died and his son king Belshazzar is on the throne. But unlike his father, who had destroyed cities and carried off plunder (Dan. 1:2), made mighty statues (Dan. 3), and built the wonders of royal Babylon (4:30), Daniel five does not record anything of prominence that Belshazzar had achieved.

The only thing that is recorded about Belshazzar is that he could throw a party and as described at the beginning of the chapter the party is substantial to say the least. Just imagine a thousand people partying and drinking wine with the king. Tables are set, the finest silverware used, including the golden vessels that had been taken by his father from the temple in Jerusalem when the exile occurred. And last but not least, Belshazzar praised his own gods which were made out of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Nothing of consequence!

Well, Belshazzar didn't have long to enjoy his feast. Even while he and his nobles were praising their man-made gods, a hand appeared and started writing on the wall, “Mene Mene Tekel Parsin.” This appearance scared the living daylights out of Belshazzar. Belshazzar, was totally undone. And although our translations say that his limbs gave way and his knees were knocking together, a perhaps better rendering is that the king was so frightened he even lost control of his bodily functions and wet himself.

And so the king extremely alarmed, immediately promises a purple robe and gold chain and promotion to whoever can interpret the writing on the wall. And as happened previously, his wise men could not interpret the writing. It was left up to Belshazzar's mother, probably a humiliating event in itself, to remind the king of the existence of Daniel, whose ability to interpret had been repeatedly demonstrated during his father's time as King. And so Daniel is called upon.

King Belshazzar's tone seems to indicate he was annoyed. He doesn't respect the position his father had given him, but addresses Daniel as one whom his father brought in exile from Judah. The king also seems to be somewhat sceptical about Daniel's ability. “I have heard” he says, indicating he wouldn't believe until he could hear for himself. In return, Daniel's response omitted the usual politeness of the Babylonian court and tells King Belshazzar bluntly that he can keep his rewards (Dan. 5:17).

However, before he interpreted the mysterious writing for Belshazzar, Daniel gives him a history lesson about the sovereignty of the only true God. God had given his father king Nebuchadnezzar greatness and glory and splendour. But when his father became arrogant, God had humbled him and brought him down from his lofty perch, causing him to be an animal for seven years. However, when his father repented, the kingdom was restored to him. The point of Daniel's speech is clear. Belshazzar, should have learned from his father's experience and humbled himself as well.

Instead, he had still exalted himself against the one true God, sacrilegiously profaning the temple vessels from Jerusalem by using them in an idolatrous act of worship. Daniel interprets the writing on the wall. MENE, God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Pasiin (Peres), your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians” (vv25–28). The last thing the king Belshazzar did was give Daniel his reward and promotion. And on that very night, while they were probably still partying, Belshazzar was killed and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two” (vv 30–31).

Congregation, let us consider what this chapter is teaching. First, God is sovereign and Nebuchadnezzar's prophetic dream of the crumbling statue, whose head was gold, torso silver and legs of bronze and feet of iron and clay, has eventuated. With Belshazzar death, the Babylon's empire was itself brought crashing to the ground. The Babylonian empire had moved from gold to silver to bronze and now the fragile feet of iron and clay had been exposed. The once mighty kingdom was ultimately blown away by the judgment of God.

And that is the first lesson we learn. Don't be awed and impressed by earthly power and wealth. It's not Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump or Hilary Clinton who rule. Nor is it Turnbull or Shorten or the Andrews of this world. They are all as nothing before the one and only true God.

Unfortunately, we are prone to forget that on occasions. If God was able to bring down the mighty Babylonian empire and its rulers, including the pretender like Belshazzar, he can do likewise today. Sadly, in our culture we are apt to elevate and adore those with power and who have accomplished something. Sometimes we even elevate whose lives are hollow, empty, and have done very little if at all to improve society, much less pay homage to our God.

Today, people seem idolize those who are physically attractive, or even those who are famous simply for being famous. Politicians, televisions and sporting stars to name a few. And it is not just the rich and the famous that we idolize, either. Sometimes we covet the assets of our neighbours as well. We envy our neighbour's car, or good looks, or successful career, or their lovely family.

And sometimes if we have some small successes of our own, we boast in our petty assets and lifestyle. Perhaps glorying in our fine house, or the thriving reputation in our field of business. The reality is that we have to constantly on our guard not to be like little Belshazzar's, puffed up by our miniscule achievements.

Mene Tekel Parsin. We certainly don't wish to be numbered, weighed and found wanting. But so many people fail to understand that before the ultimate King we have nothing to boast about. As result, many eat and drink and are busily partying, or if you will, pursuing an active sinful lifestyle, all the while deliberately ignoring God's revelation of himself. Sinful man is without an excuse. God is clearly visible in creation, in history, and in their conscience, and even more so in the Scriptures.

But because of sinful man's own wickedness, just as Belshazzar used the temple vessels to praise his false gods, so too, many people take the things that belong to God and use them to feed their lusts and idolatries. And should they continue along that path, their fate is as deserved as it is certain.

Second, it is not only Belshazzar and other human beings who have been weighed in the balance and found wanting, so were his gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. They could not they keep him safe or his kingdom from going to the Medes and Persians. Israel's God, the one true God, could effectively defend the honour of his sacred vessels and the lives of his faithful servants as seen with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace. Belshazzar's gods had no such power.

Congregation, as Christians we need to understand that the world's idols are empty and powerless. Fame and fortune promise great rewards, but they are fickle masters. Wealth may seem to hold the key to an easy life, yet those who attain it discover that their lives become more complicated than ever. Beauty is fleeting and power is deceptive. Even our freedom and democracy that we guard with our lives, are no more substantial than Belshazzar's idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone. When everything is done and dusted, none of these things can deliver true satisfaction and meaning in life.

Please don't misunderstand. Some of these are great blessings when received in thankfulness. Yet if we make these gifts our gods then we are just as foolish and blind as Belshazzar was, and we stand under the same judgment that he did.

Third, the one true God, who made the heavens and earth is the one before whom we should bow. Not only is He creator, He holds our life in his hand, just as he held sway over Belshazzar's life. He could bring us down to poverty in an instant, through ill health or misfortune, or he could snuff you out like a candle in death. As Christians, we quickly say that Jesus is king, and we are safe in his hands. But in practice we often act as if that were not true. Why is it that we are completely undone by far less threatening scenarios than that which faced Belshazzar?

Our hearts are wracked with worry if our job is merely threatened or if the car refuses to start. We are overwhelmed and despairing if our health breaks down or a treasured relationship ends. We respond angrily to people who insult us and damage our pride. We need to be careful that we do not we behave like Belshazzar. Sometimes it seems that we invest too heavily in earthly things and on occasions bow down to them a little thinking that life would not be worth living if we didn't have this or that. The reality is that without our Saviour God, life is nothing.

Fourth, let us not presume on God's mercy and patience. In fact, let us be amazed that God continues to show us his love and mercy to us, despite our sinfulness. King Nebuchadnezzar, (Belshazzar's father) was shown God's mercy in spite of his earlier persecution of God's people. But God's mercy was also seen when he humbled him and brought him to the point where he understood the reality of God's power over him so that he repented and bowed the knee before him.

Yet there was no such mercy for Belshazzar. His humbling did not bring him to the point of repentance, but only to the point of death. Interesting isn't it? Some God will humble redemptively, opening their eyes to see their true need for a Saviour God and bringing them to bow their knees to him. Others will merely be brought down to death, shown ultimately in a final moment of terror that their whole life has been an empty sham and that now they are doomed to destruction and eternal separation from God.

So let us not presume on God's mercy. It is a serious and solemn truth when God says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will harden whom I will harden" (Rom. 9:15–18). God sovereignly bestows his grace where and when he sees fit. If you are here today for the first time, then hear God's grace. Stop trusting in yourself. Humble yourself before God and kneel before his throne. Perhaps today is the day for you to learn from Belshazzar what a dangerous situation you are in.

For the reality is that without Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, you are partying on the edge of the grave. If this passage teaches anything, surely it the fact that the writing is on the wall for all who refuse to bow. In fact, should you meet your Maker without the Saviour beside you, not only will your limbs give ways and your knees start knocking, you will be undone like Belshazzar and lose all bodily functions. So don't be a Belshazzar! Rather learn the lesson that he failed to learn.

Individuals who, by the power of God's Word and Spirit turn to Jesus Christ in true repentance, can be assured that Jesus has promised that he will never, never turn away any who come to him. In fact, we who are saved never stop asking, "Who am I that I should receive an invitation to his heavenly wedding feast, while others are left unsummoned?" The only explanation is God's sovereign mercy. How high and how wide and how deep and how long is the love that the Lord has shown to us!

Fifth and finally, may this passage solicit thanksgiving and praise in your hearts. Jesus Christ is King and his kingdom will last forever. He had none of the outward glitz and glitter. He had virtually no earthly possessions and relatively few followers. He had no outward beauty or majesty to commend him. He never threw a star-studded party for a thousand of his closest friends.

Yet when Jesus' life was weighed in God's balance, it was found to be perfect and complete, able to satisfy fully the demands of God's holiness, not just for himself but for all those who come to God through him. His great banquet awaits us in the future. There will be thousands upon thousands in attendance, indeed all those who have washed their robes and made them clean in the blood of the Lamb.

So fix your eyes on him and look forward to the last heavenly banquet to which Jesus Christ invites us, a feast that can be entered only by grace, by those who are clothed in the garments that God provides, the righteousness of his Son. Amen.