

30 October 2022
All Saints Sunday

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

The book of Daniel is fascinating, and provides several of the vivid stories we may have encountered in the Sunday Schools of our youth or as depicted in Christian art: Daniel interpreting King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refusing to bow down to the image of gold and being kept from harm in the fiery furnace into which they are thrown; the prophetic writing on the wall during King Belshazzar's feast; Daniel kept safe in a den of lions.

All these familiar stories come from the first six chapters of the book. Then, at chapter 7, there is a crucial turn; in the second half of the book we no longer have vivid Sunday School stories, but rather a series of visions received by Daniel which are strange and complex.¹

Daniel's dream in this chapter 7 takes place in the first year of a king's reign. The first year of a monarch's reign marks the beginning of a new era, rather like the UK recognising the close of the second Elizabethan age and the beginning of a new Carolean one. It is a time to look back and, especially, to look forward. If the reign of the previous monarch has been good, there may be concern about the future. If life under the previous monarch has been miserable, then the people might imagine a better world to come. It is time to dwell on hope. As Daniel records his dream, it appears that he recognises the significance of its meaning for his time and for the future.

The dream has the backdrop of the "great sea". For the people of the Bible – a people who were not a seafaring nation – the sea represents a world of chaos. Out of the troubled waters four frightening beasts emerge, each with distinctive characteristics.

¹ The discussion of Daniel that follows owes much to Han "Commentary", often quoting freely.

Daniel, himself highly-regarded as an interpreter of dreams, is forced to seek an explanation from an attending angel. He is told that these beasts represent the kings of the earth. Daniel has been given a vision of an historical sweep of human history. The four kingdoms represented are beastly in their nature. Their behaviour is marked by pride, greed, violence, and terror. They rise one after the other; they do not last forever.

Against this background there comes at last the hopeful part. After the four kings have each had their day, Daniel is told that “the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever”.

God is described as the “Most High” – *elyon*, a title which focuses on God’s utter supremacy in status and power.² The text makes clear that God stands over and above the aforementioned kings. God is sovereign over all the world; there is no authority higher than his. God is therefore a direct challenge to all earthly powers that seek to prop themselves up and thrust themselves forward.

The kingdom of the Most High will be eternal. This is especially emphasised in the angel’s interpretation: the kingdom will be “forever – yes, for ever and ever”. This again is in pronounced contrast with the temporary reigns of the four earthly kings. In history, mighty kingdoms come onto the face of the map only to disappear forever. Students of history will have no difficulty recalling kingdoms and empires from ancient through to more recent times that were once great and now no longer exist. No nation can be shielded from this fate, no matter how desperately it may pursue its own permanence.

The promise of the eternal kingdom of God provided a hope-filled perspective for the people of Daniel’s time living under Babylonian oppression in exile. While the faithful might face trials now, and while the immediate prospect may be frightening, God will ultimately triumph. (The blessings and woes of Jesus’ sermon, recounted in Luke 6, point in the same direction.)

² Strong, Kohlberger and Swanson, *The Strongest Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Zondervan, 2001, p.1435.

Many of the people we count as Saints and give thanks for today went through exactly this kind of thing: there were hardships and trials of many kinds, they underwent all the hateful and destructive power of human kings and empires, but they faced these things with fortitude, faith and hope because of the nature of the one we serve – the Most High.

For us today there is encouragement in Daniel as we remind ourselves of the position of the things that have oppressive power over us today relative to the might and majesty of God.

It is a little unfortunate that the Lectionary compilers have skipped over a chunk of Daniel 7. The part missed out may in fact contain the most significant part of all. At the centre of Daniel's vision is a picture of God, the "Ancient of Days" on his throne, pronouncing judgement. The final beast is destroyed. And then we read this:

... there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

[Daniel 7:13-14]

This picture of "one like a son of man" – a human being, led into the presence of God and given sovereign power – had, long before the first century AD come to be attached to hope for the Messiah. The Messiah was believed to be one who would be the anointed leader of God's people and who would be vindicated, winning victory over Israel's oppressors.

And of course, we who live now know how that messianic hope was ultimately realised in Jesus. What Jesus underwent, and what it was understood to mean, would come to be expressed in terms very like those we encounter in this Daniel vision: Paul for example writes in the following way, in Ephesians 1:

¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who

believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and *seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,* ²¹ *far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked,* not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. [Ephesians 1:18-23, emphasis added]

But I too have been guilty of skipping over something important. Did you notice who it was that was given the kingdom in Daniel 7? Listen again:

“The holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever”.

This little verse points to a magnificent biblical truth: human beings have been created to be co-rulers with Christ, ruling as agents of the Most High. This is huge! The language of “holy ones” points us to the saints we acknowledge in our celebration today; but, true as that is, it must not obscure from us the important truth that we are included in that too. Jesus said to his over-anxious followers, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for the Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.” [Luke 12:32] When Paul talks of God’s “glorious inheritance in his holy people” the word translated “holy people” is *hagios*, the same word translated elsewhere as “saints”.

We give thanks for the capital S “Saints” – the great heroes like Peter and Paul, James and John, Oswald, Patrick; we give thanks for others who haven’t been given the style “Saint” but are nevertheless acknowledged in the calendar of our church – people like Tarore of Waharoa, Mary Sumner, Roger of Taizé; and we give thanks for those whose names often go unrecorded but who were foundational in the establishment of our church community here or in our own coming to, and growing in, the faith.

But while we give thanks we do well to recall that all those we would name were all too often deeply flawed human beings just like us. (To use the illustration from last week, every one of us brings to God an imperfect rug; every one of us is a sinner as well as a saint.)

When we remember the saints, we do so and give thanks to God for them not least because they are pointers reminding us of *our common* calling to faithfully follow Jesus wherever he may take us, and whatever he may require of us. We do it all confident in the hope we share with the saints of our inheritance within the kingdom of God.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 2

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ... ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ *And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,* ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. [Eph 2:1-2, 4-10, emphasis added]

God’s call to believers is that we all participate in the drama of redemption that is playing itself out now, but also awaits its completion in Christ.³ In the meantime, with all the saints, we hold hope that our faithful God will bring all things into subjection to Christ. Paul asserts not only that God’s power is unsurpassed, but also that it has been deployed to the advantage of believers. There are no created powers that can ultimately resist God. As has always been the case there are powers that oversee practices, dispositions, and social structures that touch all aspects of human life. Created for good as part of God’s good creation, they have become hostile to God, working now to alienate people from God. They too need to be reconciled and put into their proper place under Christ’s rule. In this there is great hope for us as we consider the powers and all that is out of order in our world today.

³ The following owes much to Fowl, “Commentary”

Paul's paragraph ends emphasising Christ's role in filling all things, bringing everything into its proper place and towards its proper purpose. Extraordinarily he names the church as the very place of that filling. Here again we have the amazing truth of our human calling to be God's holy ones, given power and authority to work his purpose in the world. This truth, and the hope it conveys, is no less important in the face of the rival kings, empires, powers, structures, approaches and attitudes we face in our own day.

Today as we give thanks for all the saints of every age, may we be strengthened and encouraged in our own calling in our own time.

Sources:

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