

Coming Through Fire: Notes on Connections with Daniel and Jesus

Daniel 6: 1-23 & Luke 24: 1-9, 36-43 & 50-53.

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Thank you for your kind and gracious invitation to speak this evening. I must confess that, following our Old Testament reading, I feel a bit like a Lion in a Den of Daniels. Let us hope I fare as well as the original Daniel did. But in all seriousness, if we were to have a Bible Quiz on what connects our two readings, I'd be awarding points and prizes for the following observations (in the C+ to B++ mark-range).

First, both Daniel and Jesus are placed in stone-sealed tombs, and written off as dead. Second, both are victims of plots and betrayals. They are spied on too. Their persecutors are motivated by malice and malfeasance, and they mean to harm. Third, Daniel and Jesus are both tried and convicted in manner that is unfair, and denies them justice. Fourth, both cheat death...quite miraculously. Daniel defies death – the lions don't harm him. Jesus does endure suffering and death, but is resurrected. Fifth, their survival or resurrection confounds their witnesses, and puts the judgment back on the persecutors. Sixth, they reverse their prosecution and persecution, not by acts of vengeance, but by gracious, holy example. Seventh, as a famous Dean once said, "only the gentle are truly strong". He was right, and this is true of both Jesus and Daniel, post-trial and post-tribulation. Incidentally, the Dean in this quote above was James Dean – so not a cleric!

Yet what is the deeper connection within these passages? Can I suggest three links that you might not notice at first sight, but they are there in the texts.

First, and in the case of Daniel, he is, like his compatriots, Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego (see *Daniel 3* – they come through fire!), a eunuch. Jesus, as you may recall, was quite pro-eunuchs. In fact, he thought they made quite good disciples. Here is what Jesus says in *Matthew 19: 12*: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who

Jesus, like many people 2000 years ago, regarded eunuchs as reliable, dedicated and dependable - ideal discipleship. Jesus regarded the lack of offspring from a as not tied down with the cumbersome business of burying their recently deceased father. Or joining the disciples only after attending to family matters; nor pausing to complete an important livestock investment, property deal and land purchase, before signing up for service.

Eunuchs have existed since our earliest histories, and were generally deemed to be reliable. That word ‘reliable’ might seem a rather odd term for us to pay much regard to in our day and age. Modernity is essentially an age of reliability. As eunuchs had neither offspring nor in-laws and were invariably made to be eunuchs from a relatively young age, they were groomed to be trustworthy. They were programmed to undertake certain tasks. Eunuchs formed a powerful group in the Roman Empire. They served the imperial bedchamber, privy to the innermost workings of the Empire. Our word ‘eunuch’ comes from the Greek for ‘bed-guard’.

However, let us tackle to that unavoidable technical question: eunuch – but how? Essentially, there were four different types. *Spado* (plural: *spadones*) – was the generic term for asexual men, who may have been born without strong sexual characteristics. So, without the full sex organs or those whose sex organs failed to develop at puberty.

Then there were *thlibiae* – those whose testicles had been deliberately bruised or pressed. The Greek verb *thlibein* means ‘to press hard’, and the process here was to tie the scrotum tightly in order to sever the *vas deferens* without amputation. The genitals would therefore appear normal. Another type were *thladiæ* (from a Greek verb *thlan* ‘to crush’) where the testicles were crushed between two bricks, rendering them person (or victim) sterile. Finally, there were *castrati*, undergoing a partial or full removal of their sex organs. This was done to pre-pubescent boys to produce catamites.

Please note, these procedures are not requirements for entry into the Civil Service or Foreign Office today. However, please also note that eunuchs were the earliest practitioners of ‘safe sex’. As one ancient writer put it with great diplomatic delicacy, eunuchs permitted one to “savour the blossoming flowers of passion, but without being burdened by the fruit of such unions...”.

So my first link between Jesus and Daniel relates to their status – foreigner and yet also close advisor to the king in the case of Daniel, and in Jesus’s case, he is the rabbi-teacher-political-social-activist, and also well-disposed to foreigners. Both are set apart for this, and considered to be a danger and threat to the prevailing powers. Their vocation is not much picked up as thrust upon them, and because of that, their bodies must suffer for this.

Second, and linked to this, with the recent recovery of African-American histories, Christians are coming to terms with collusion in privileging white-male-normativity. You may never have seen a copy of the *Slave Bible*, specifically published for educating slaves in the early 19th century. Its full title was *Select Parts of the Holy Bible for the use of the Negro Slaves in the British West-India Islands*. Such bibles had all references to freedom and escape from slavery excised, while passages encouraging obedience and submission were emphasized.

It was a kind of racist *Reader's Digest* version of scripture – where the editors served up just ten percent of the Old Testament and around half of the New Testament. Excluded passages were *Galatians* 3: 28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free...”), which was thought to have potential for inciting rebellion. Passages such *Ephesians* 6: 5 (“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ”) were retained.

The targeting, sexual abuse, deliberate humiliation and physical emasculation of criminalised or deliberately demonised black men in the early twentieth century Deep South often involved tarring and feathering, preceding their castration, before eventual lynching. This was set out as a spectacle before the prurient curiosity of large crowds of white spectators, and it is well chronicled. You could even buy souvenir postcards of such events (which many witnesses did), mailing (goaded?) their ‘friends’ living in liberal eastern US states.

We might remember that many of those targeted to die were condemned before they could be tried and judged, even though it was to be an all-white-male jury. I think of the words uttered before Jesus in the court of Caiaphas: “what need have we of witnesses?” (*Matthew* 26: 65). Jesus was condemned to death before the defence or prosecution had presented their case. Why bother with justice? That was Daniel’s experience too.

Jesus was stripped, whipped, scourged and mocked. You may find his silence eloquent, powerful or puzzling. Yet I think in our age, his silence echoes differently and cries across two thousand years of sexual, marital, emotional and physical abuses. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements remind us that victims are often forced into silence. As many victims of sexual violence testify, it was by becoming passive and no longer resisting that the ordeal was over quicker, and the violence lesser. Some victims also believe they may die quicker, and less painfully if they do not struggle or scream. There is no point in protesting or resisting the groups of men hitting the blindfolded Jesus; striking, beating, spitting at, taunting and abusing him. The perpetrators kept their identity anonymous; their victim was in the dark.

Recently discovered first-hand accounts of Roman crucifixions reveal that the victim might be forced to watch their family or friends brutalised, beaten or raped whilst they were compelled to watch. The disciples had good reasons to be scarce at the foot of the cross. Getting caught up in a crucifixion – as a friend or family member of the victim – was an extremely dangerous business for witnesses. Ancient shame culture was the deliberate stripping of a person’s dignity and honour. Victims of crucifixion were often pinned up naked, with their slow death through asphyxiation producing its own perverse spectacle. Unable to exercise any self-control of their muscles or reflexes in their body, this sadistic cruelty only added to their public humiliation.

Third, one of the early lesser-known Christian heresies was from Eutyches, who taught that Jesus' ascension was a spiritual event, not a physical one. The heresy was attractive 2,000 years ago, even without the aid of complex telescopes, as few wished to ponder the thought of Jesus flying past Mars, and turning right at Venus before taking a hard left at Saturn. Modern cosmologists like the late Carl Sagan pointed out that if Jesus was ascending at the speed of light, our most powerful telescopes would still be able to see him. The erstwhile liberal American Bishop, Jack Spong, used to say that Sagan's observation showed how daft the doctrine of the Ascension is.

I profoundly disagree. The Ascension...spiritual, physical, symbolic...does it matter? Yes, it does, and hugely. As the Early Church Father Origen said, when Jesus returned to his Father, the angels at the gates of heaven were startled, and almost denied Jesus' admission or entry, because the angels reasoned that "the corporeal shall not pass into the incorporeal". But Christian orthodoxy says this must be so. Because Jesus bodily ascends to his Father with his wounds in his post-resurrection body. Why does this matter?

Jesus returns to heaven with our humanity, and his. If you believe in Jesus' bodily Incarnation – as I do – then his Ascension must also be bodily. I can explain neither biologically or cosmologically. But theologically, humanly and spiritually, this obviously really matters. What is not assumed is not redeemed. If true of the Incarnation, death and resurrection, it is also true of the Ascension.

God does not now dispense with the flesh, heartache, suffering and frailty of humanity. It is returned to the Father in the person of Jesus, where it remains abiding in God: "until he, Jesus, comes again in glory" (*Matthew 16: 27*). As *Hebrews 7: 25* says, "He is able always to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He lives forever to intercede for us". Jesus continues to be incarnate, and our humanity abides in the love of this divinity.

So Daniel and Jesus emerge from their ordeals of fire. Not only intact, but also vindicated. Daniel's miraculous survival, and Jesus' resurrection, are a judgment on their accusers and abusers. As *Romans 8* says:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or lions, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor tormentors nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord". Nothing, can separate us from the love of God. Or for that matter, our persecutors. Daniel and Jesus emerging from their tombs affirms this for us all.

I know that we all have our own experiences of profound betrayal, and sometimes treachery. I know too that we wait and hope for justice, and that we should work for that. But we also worship a God of infinite grace, mercy, forgiveness and love, and this is sometimes too hard for us to bear. I put it to you that what bind Daniel and Jesus together is their trust in God, and their refusal to seek vengeance. They come through their ordeal, not seeking to return blow for blow, or injury for injury, but with a different call to us. It is not one that sanctifies passivity, or preaches cheap grace. There must be justice. But it must flow from truth, mercy and love.

For many years now I have been absorbed by the synchronicity of the two untimely deaths we remember in Holy Week: Jesus...and Judas. Norma Faber (*Compassion*) asks where we find Mary, the mother of Jesus on Good Friday?

In Mary's house the mourners gather.
Sorrow pierces them like a nail.
Where's Mary herself meanwhile?
Gone to comfort Judas's mother.

As the mystics say, you cannot find Jesus in Heaven on Good Friday because he's gone looking for Judas in Hell. Jesus will not return to his Father without him. No-one is left behind.

So, for the one who reaches out to the despised and rejected, God says, through Christ, that he too will know something of that rejection. The scripting and patterning of this in the life of Jesus is as important for the story of salvation as is the cross. You have to see it as a whole. Sometimes the rejection is active, and sometimes quite passive. But Jesus is sensate to both; this is integral to God's incarnation: the word became flesh. God knows precisely what it is to be human. This includes our deepest pains, which are often not only imprinted on the body, but also in the soul and heart. Some years ago there was a competition on Radio 4 to write a short sermon. The winner was called 'The Kiss', and it went like this:

'Good to have you home, son. Sorry you were in so much pain'.
'It wasn't the nails that hurt, dad. It was the kiss.'

Our attention is drawn here to deeply physical act of kissing. The kissing of Jesus' feet by an unknown woman; the kiss of Judas in betrayal. But whatever kind of kiss it was, the point is simple. God dwelt with us, amongst and as one of us: the word made flesh. And it is that flesh that returns to heaven in the ascension. Even flesh marked by pain, torment and torture. The flesh that Jesus returns to heaven with is every bit like ours. It has been loved, held, embraced and cherished. But it is also weathered, aged, beaten, betrayed, rejected, despised and defeated. It must labour to be born, and it must struggle and gasp for breath at the very end of life. Finally, it has died. This is the flesh of the resurrection too. The one still marked with nails, but now raised.

So in this new season of the Spirit, which is our Pentecost, how shall we live? What shall we do when we are afflicted? Scott Cairns, the American poet, has re-written this beautiful version of the 'Beatitudes' for this season of the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit to be born in us, here today (*Matthew 5*):

Blessed as well are the wounded but nonetheless kind,
for they shall observe their own mending.
Blessed are those who shed their every anxious defence,
for they shall obtain consolation.
Blessed are those whose sympathy throbs as an ache,
for they shall see the end of suffering.
Blessed are those who do not presume,
for they shall be surprised at every turn.
Blessed are those who seek the God in secret,
for they shall hear His very voice rising as a pulse.
Blessed moreover are those who refuse to judge,
For they shall forget their most grave transgressions.
Blessed are those who watch and pray, who seek and plead,
for they shall see, and shall be heard.

Amen.

Author Note:

In the light of several other interventions and a general pattern adopted by the Bishop of Oxford, Professor Percy – as with other invitations to speak or give an address at church or church-related events – was not permitted to preach this as a sermon within the context of the Evensong for which it was originally intended. The talk (or address) therefore followed the conclusion of Evensong after the blessing. We are immensely grateful to St. Matthew's Westminster and Fr. Philip Chester for hosting the address, and keeping faith with the programme and the speaker. Professor Percy did not wear any clerical attire, as proscribed by the current restrictions imposed.