

DANIEL 7 CBC 29.11.2020

Please read Daniel 7:1-28 ...

What do you make of our reading? Up to now, the book of Daniel has consisted of fairly straightforward stories, but from now till the end we have a series of visions packed with fantastic creatures and strange happenings. These are chapters which scholars debate, spiritual eccentrics devour, ordinary Christians shy away from – and preachers, when they reach this point, wonder if a sermon series on Daniel was really such a good idea! Yet it's part of God's word, and rightly handled it will feed us.

These chapters give us God's perspective on the events of history. What we see in the world around us is what we think of as reality. But it's not the ultimate reality. Think of the Transfiguration of Jesus: God drew back the curtain and showed the disciples another reality that was there all the time. That's what happens in Daniel's visions. God draws back the curtain to show us a reality we need to know if we're to live as God's people.

The style of writing is what's called "apocalyptic", and perhaps you hear "apocalyptic" as meaning "weird and confusing", but actually it means "unveiling, revealing". God is showing us something real and important. Apocalyptic literature uses dramatic and even bizarre symbolism to declare its message, but it's not fantasy. It's a vivid and colourful way of describing reality so that we *feel* it. Daniel saw and felt the reality of evil. This is the world we live in. But he also saw how God will keep us, and we need to know that. These visions aren't meant as amusement for armchair detectives or futurologists, but as battle rations for soldiers.

The date of the vision is significant (v.1): we've gone back to a time before Belshazzar's feast, and before the Lions' Den. It was time of great change in Babylon, when the spiritual and moral improvements of Nebuchadnezzar's day had been reversed, and Daniel himself had been sidelined. Had his life's work and witness therefore been in vain? It was in these troubled times that Daniel had this vision.

It begins with the churning sea (v.2), something frightening, out of control, dangerous. And from it emerge four beasts, hideous creatures made up of various parts of animals and birds all stitched together. The first is basically like a lion, the second like a bear (not a teddy bear, v.5 – it's got three ribs between its teeth so it isn't fasting!), and the third like a leopard. But the fourth beast is so horrible it can't be compared to anything else (v.7). And while adults agonize unnecessarily about the details, a child would grasp what these creatures are. "*They're MONSTERS!*" Precisely.

And we're told (v.17) that these monsters represent earthly rulers and their power. Which ones? The usual interpretation is that the first beast represents the Babylonian empire; the second = the Medes and Persians; the third = the Greeks; and the fourth in some way represents the Roman empire, though it goes beyond that. For this beast has ten horns (v.7), and then along comes a little horn which uproots three of the others (v.8). And this is explained in v.24 in terms of a whole series of kings, culminating in one exceptionally powerful king.

Frankly, I doubt if we're meant to identify these horns / kings with particular individuals or empires. Gallons of ink have been spilled – some scholarly, some not so scholarly – trying to make one-for-one identifications. And if you've got that cast of mind, you'll find here not only Babylon but also the Turks, the Crusades, the Pope, Hitler, Communism, the EU, and no doubt Donald

Trump and Joe Biden! But I would urge you not to be dogmatic in saying “*This = That*”, because those interpretations go well beyond the text.

None of the kingdoms in Da 7 is precisely defined, and that’s intentional, because this is a picture of fallen human power throughout history. Daniel is being shown that history is a succession of rulers, kingdoms, empires, all of which have beastly qualities to a greater or lesser degree: they’re selfish, boastful, arrogant, greedy, power-hungry, trampling on others etc. The reason why “*This = That*” interpretations gain traction in every generation is that ALL this world’s powers share these characteristics!

But Daniel also sees that history culminates with the worst ruler of the lot. The little horn may look small, but he’s more powerful than a bunch of the other kings put together. In fact, the description of the little horn in vv.21-22 is suggestive of Paul’s “*man of lawlessness*” (2Thess 2:3-4,8) and John’s “*antichrist*” (1Jn 2:18). But as John comments, “*even now many antichrists have come*” - because these characteristics are *always* with us, even before the final, ultimate manifestation.

So Daniel’s vision is telling us that history is beastly, scary. And it tells us that we can’t understand the crack-pot behaviour of nations without seeing the spiritual forces at work. We need to include our doctrine of sin in our understanding of politics. God wants us to be realists about life in this world. He shows us these things, not to make us predictors of the future, but to help us live wisely in the present, alert to the reality of evil, and not surprised or cast down by it.

Well, you might say, “It’s hard *not* to be cast down in such a world!” But Daniel’s vision wasn’t finished! While the little horn was boasting and being absorbed with himself (v.8), he failed to notice something that was happening nearby (vv.9-10). Suddenly the scene is changed: we move from a world in turmoil to the order and authority of a courtroom. God the Judge takes His seat and the books of evidence are opened. He’s described as “*the Ancient of Days*” - not meaning God is decrepit and shaky, but that He’s *unshakeable*, timeless, the one eternal fixture in the chaos.

His throne is like a fiery chariot, and what an entourage He has! “*Thousands upon thousands attended Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him ...*” (v.10). Daniel, who so often stood alone, must have realized, “Actually, I’m not alone.” Note: he saw this vision *before* he faced the lions’ den. Imagine if you actually saw this - wouldn’t it transform your day today?

Here is the Judge of all the earth who will not leave His people at the mercy of the beasts. But the (amusing) thing is that the little horn doesn’t seem to notice (vv.11-12). It’s like a pantomime: he’s still rabbiting on about himself while thousands upon thousands of heaven’s army line up behind him. And as Daniel looks on he sees this little horn and all the beasts brought to account by God and destroyed.

But if the beasts are dethroned, who will be enthroned? Well, God of course! EXCEPT ... that’s not quite how Daniel saw it in his dream. At the very point where we expect to be told simply that God ruled, we’re told instead that “*one like a son of man*” - a human being - ruled (v.13)! God gives all dominion to a human being. Yet no ordinary human being, for He comes with the clouds of heaven - a sign of God’s presence. And people everywhere worship Him (v.14) - and if we’ve learned anything about Daniel from this book, it’s that he’d rather *die* than worship a human being. Only God is to be worshipped. No wonder Daniel was “*troubled in spirit*” (v.15). A human being worshipped as God?? Who can this be?

This is one area in which we're able to understand Daniel's vision better than he did. The New Testament leaves us in no doubt who it was that Daniel saw in his vision than night. Our Lord Jesus, the eternal Son of God, *became* man for our salvation. He could have chosen many Old Testament terms to describe Himself and His mission, but His favourite term was "*the Son of Man*". And when Jesus was asked by the high priest at His trial if He was the Messiah, He said Yes, and immediately referenced Da 7: "*from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven*" (Mt 26:63-64). No wonder Caiaphas blew a gasket! If Jesus is the Son of Man, where does that leave Caiaphas?

And so in the New Testament we see our Lord Jesus Christ, God who became man, living a perfect life, overcoming sin and death through His cross and resurrection, and ascending to enter God's presence in heaven. *And authority to rule is given to a human being, not a beast.* We know from Ge 1 that human beings were meant to have dominion over God's world: to rule God's world for God. And it's because we've failed to do that that our world is in such a mess. But Jesus was faithful, and in Him God's purpose is at last fulfilled. Da 7 is a coronation: a perfect human is enthroned and given authority to rule.

But it may not always seem that way when we look at the world around us. Evil often seems to have the upper hand. That's how it must have seemed to Daniel in Belshazzar's day. But that's why God gave Daniel this vision to pass on to us. Ultimate power is not in Washington or Moscow or Beijing but in the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's the message of Da 7. When all the kingdoms of this world have passed away, the man who is God will still be reigning. Of His kingdom there shall be no end (v.14).

And He shares His dominion with His people! Look at three astonishing verses: vv.18, 22, 27. Are we reading that correctly?? Shouldn't v.27 say "*Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to JESUS?*" But Jesus just can't stand being separated from His people. He shares with us the kingdom that He won. And that tells us *what kind* of King we serve – so different from the monsters!

It may seem strange that Daniel's vision didn't immediately cheer him up (vv.15, 28). But Daniel was being realistic. He'd seen a vision of God's triumph, but he'd also seen something of the cost of the battle. We ourselves live this side of the cross and resurrection, but we're still troubled by the evil and suffering in the world, aren't we? Do we never feel anxious for ourselves or our children?

Yes, Satan is a defeated foe, but the battle is still fierce. And that's because we're living in the *middle* of Daniel's vision, not at the end. The King has begun to reign and the beasts are doomed, but they're not yet dead. But in Christ, we win in the end. And while that may not keep us from pain, it should keep us from panic. So whatever challenges come our way this week, let's hang in there and go on trusting our King.

But let me close with a word for anyone who feels they've never really known Jesus as King. In this battle, we can't be on God's side without enthroning Jesus in our own life. Have you done that? The ruler of the universe is our Lord Jesus Christ, and if you want to understand why you're in this world and what life is for, you need to know Him. He's the only One who can give us knowledge of who we are, and knowledge of God our Father. And when you come to know Him, the things you experience in life – the good, the bad, and even the downright ugly – begin to fall into place in a coherent story.

And best of all, you can receive the gift of God's favour (v.22), because Jesus went to the cross and took on Himself God's *disfavour* which we deserved, in order that we might have God's favour which *He* deserved. And it's offered through the gospel to everyone who believes.

Exactly forty-eight years ago today, I bowed to Jesus as MY King, and I received the gift of God's favour and a share in His Kingdom. And if you've never taken that step, I urge you to take it today.

PRAYER: Lord God, we live in a brutal world which can't be humanized until it's ruled by Jesus. Look on us with mercy. We bring you our brokenness and ask that by Your Spirit, Jesus may rule our hearts and homes and the nations of this world with His love; for Your glory's sake. Amen.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION:

- What has caused you fear, anxiety or discouragement lately?
- How would you have reacted differently in that moment if your heart was captured by the vision of Christ ruling over the chaos?
- How does Daniel 7 encourage you to pray more confidently for the needs of your family, your community and your nation?