

Faith under fire – Strangers in a foreign land

A Reflection on Daniel 3: 14-20 & John 8: 31-42

In our Old Testament passage today we have one of the two great stories in Daniel. This one is perhaps not as well known as Daniel in the lion's den. Here we are introduced to three of his friends who, like Daniel were also young men born into the Jewish community under exile in Babylon. "They are as good as Babylonians" says King Nebuchadnezzar "select the best and over a three year stay in my palace teach them our language and customs". So it was that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were selected (along with Daniel who becomes the star of the show later in this book) complete with their new Babylonian names. What great names they are too. Sunday School teachers over the years have also rechristened them with names like "Small Shack, Medium Shack and A-bungalow". You may know other versions too!

Despite all of this training and integration our quartet remain faithful to the one true God and the ways and traditions of their Jewish religion. They make no bones about it and stick defiantly to their roots despite the stringent requirements of King "N" (to save me keep typing his full name!). To demonstrate his absolute power King "N" had built a 90-foot-tall golden statue. Not only a grand testament to bad taste, but also an idol before which all were required to bow down and worship at the given musical signal.

S, M & A (saving my typing fingers!) remain defiant despite the harsh punishment for disobedience of being thrown into the fiery furnace, this time super-heated especially for them! They are ready to put their faith under fire with the words: "The God we serve is able to save us from it and he will rescue us from your hand, O king." Indeed, he does and how! (Thinking about this fiery furnace I am reminded of the time I burnt the whole of an old shed in our garden using one of those galvanised dustbin incinerators. The white heat was so intense that the whole thing melted before me.) S, M and A though in the heart of their incinerator shake off their shackles and with the help of a mysterious god like figure emerge unscathed, Though probably, like me in the garden incident, smelling a bit like a bonfire for some time after!

So, what does this great old testament story have to say to us as Christians today I wonder? I suggest that it might have some relevance to the world situation that we find ourselves in. The general behaviour of this secular society for me continues to make it seem as though the world has lost its way. There is always that temptation to go with the flow and be tempted to do things that we know are contrary to our Christian lives as modelled by Christ. It certainly feels at times that, as Christians, we are still like strangers in a foreign land. Though times are strange and trying, I suppose we are not quite in a "fiery furnace". However perhaps the question that we ask ourselves in times like these is: "in whom do we place our hope and trust, when the heat is on, when fear is in the air and our faith feels under fire?"

We are reminded in our gospel reading (John 8:31-42) that Jesus Christ was sent by his Father in love for us. Jesus was not alone and through our love for him nor are we. Surely Jesus Christ is the one who, like that angel in the fiery furnace, will release us from the bonds of sin, fear and death, eventually guiding us out into the cooling light of day, unsinged and unscathed by our trials today, tomorrow and in the weeks to come, now and for evermore. AMEN.

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