**10TH April 2016**

**Daniel 1. 8-21; Matthew 2.1-12**

Steve Chalke tells the story[[1]](#endnote-1) of a friend of his who is a vicar of a high Anglican Church. One Saturday morning a member of his congregation, a church warden, came to his door in a state of desperate panic. He invited her in to find out what was wrong and what he could do to help.

As soon as they were inside she began her story: That morning she had collected a box of communion wafers for the next day’s Eucharist service. She had put the wafers carefully into her handbag and caught the bus home. But when she arrived back at her house she discovered that the box had somehow opened in her bag; the wafers had spilled out and broken into countless pieces. Not knowing what to do she went straight to the vicar’s house, still clutching the bag filled with the crumbs of Christ’s body.

Having heard her story, the vicar sympathized that it was a shame the wafers had been broken, but said that it really wasn’t something to get in a panic about as they could always get some more. ‘But you don’t understand’, said the woman, still noticeably agitated. Staring into the handbag at the crushed wafers, she pondered, ‘It’s just that…. Has my handbag contaminated the host, or has the host sanctified my handbag?’

The story may be light-hearted, but it illustrates a serious question for the church – do we believe that involvement in secular society corrupts and contaminates us? Who can we safely include in our communities? Where do we draw the line? Should we draw the line? If we don’t will we be compromised and lose our distinctiveness? After all, standards matter?! Should we withdraw and safeguard ourselves and the truth we hold? What does it mean to be a Christian? – What is distinctive, different about being a Christian?

Today we have the book of Daniel as our reading. In two weeks’ time I will look at the book of Esther. Both books are about the challenges of keeping true to your faith in a hostile environment.

The story of Daniel is set in the time when the Jews were in exile in Babylon. Daniel is a representative Jew who has learned to sustain and practice his distinctive Jewish identity in the presence of indifferent or hostile imperial power and Babylonian culture.

Most scholars believe it was written sometime in the second century BC drawing on stories even legends from the time of exile which could inspire contemporary Jews to withstand a fierce attempt by the Greek influenced ruler of Judea, Antiochus Epiphanes to eradicate the Jewish faith. That resulted in the Maccabean revolt and also the creation of the Hasidic Jews – the ultra-orthodox Jews who still exist today.

The book is a book for our times too! In Britain our dominant culture is secular and non-religious. Our society defines itself by what we buy and how we look not what we believe and the faith we hold. More people shopped on line on Christmas Day than went to church. The last vestiges of Christianity are being drained from our society. Militant atheism is doing its best to rid the nation of what they see as infantile and dangerous beliefs. Everyone seems to be jumping on the band wagon to give religion a good kicking.

We live in a society that is increasingly hostile to people of faith and there are continuous news items about the conflict between the values of a secular nation and the freedom of religious belief. But this is nothing new. Daniel was there before us. How did he survive?

It seems that he played along with the system up to a point. He worked hard, he tried his best. He didn’t deliberately set out to offend or challenge the status quo – to denounce the majority or call down curses on them. But he retained his integrity and his identity. At certain points there were lines he would not cross.

The story goes that Daniel along with some other Israelites were selected to serve in the king’s house. They are given new Babylonian names. The names reflect Babylonian deities. They are meant to learn wisdom and Babylonian ways of doing things. The provision of education, food, and names places them under powerful cultural forces. Nebuchadnezzar the King is attempting to turn the next generation of Israel into good Babylonians. He wanted to change their thinking by giving them a Babylonian education. He wanted to change their loyalty by giving them Babylonian names. He wanted to change their lifestyle by changing their diet.

So it is interesting that Daniel is prepared to accommodate to the education and even to the Babylonian name but he draws a line at the diet: the challenge to his lifestyle. Why draw the line at one and not at the others? It seems arbitrary and it is worth pondering on?

Daniel decides he wouldn’t eat the food and wine from the royal table. Up to this point the exiles have had everything decided for them. Now they cease to be faceless exiles and helpless victims. Daniel seizes the initiative from the Babylonians. At Babylonian food he draws the line. For him accepting the palace provisions involves a compromise of faith in a way that accepting a share in its life, its work, its education and its names do not.

Believers in other contexts, in our context, or in other cultures might have identified their sticking point elsewhere. In the context of the exile, Isaiah 40-55 is scathing about Babylonian religion but food is too trivial for the prophet to mention.

Perhaps part of the point is that a line should be drawn somewhere but leaves it to the individual conscience. Total assimilation (losing your own distinctiveness) is to be avoided. For some, food is part of your of identity We are what we eat; the English pejoratively call the French ‘frogs’ and the French call the English ‘roast beefs’. It is common for the expatriate community to maintain its distinctiveness partly by maintaining its distinctive diet. Israel’s own food laws presuppose its own identity. Daniel insists on marking himself out on this matter as being different and belonging to a special people and to a specific Lord. But he still wishes to serve his king and the empire of the Babylonians – he still wants to do his bit for the well-being of the society he finds himself in - but he recognises that there are points at which he has to draw a line.

As Christians we are called to be citizens of two worlds, neither surrendering citizenship by assimilation – becoming just like everyone else; nor surrendering the other way by forming a ghetto – being separate from the world and the concerns of the world.

I was brought up with the saying that Christians should be in the world but not of the world. Meaning that we should not hide away from our involvement in society but neither we should we be involved in society at the expense of compromising our faith.

The greatest compromise I suggest is that of withdrawal and the greatest loss of Christian distinctiveness is that which comes from a lack of involvement. How can you be salt for the world unless that salt is in the food seasoning it?

From time to time the church has seen the world as a totally evil, dark and corrupting place and felt it should have nothing to do with it and come apart and be separate. The desert fathers wandered off into the desert in the first few centuries of the Church being born. Monasteries also had some of that idea. The puritan movement in the 16th century sought holiness and separation. The Pilgrim Fathers sailed to America to set up the kingdom of God on earth. Denominations such as the exclusive brethren are what they say on the tin: Exclusive – they want to exclude the corrupting influences of the world as they see them.

Debbie and I have a number of Christian friends who have decided not to have a TV in their house. They are part of the 0.5% of the population of the UK who do not own a TV. They don’t want a TV because they don’t want something else teaching their children morals and values or undermining their own upbringing of their children.

Now I respect their choice and think it’s a very brave decision. We have a TV in our house, which is partly there I guess, so that I can watch the football. I know that I often despair at some of the programmes on TV and the values and opinions that are put over through those programmes. I often annoy my kids by passing comment on them. ‘Oh Dad’ they will cry in protest. But we also often have good banter about some of the issues. I guess our approach has been engagement and critical reflection on popular culture rather than withdrawal from it.

Paul in his letter to the Romans calls on Christians not to be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Then we will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good and pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12.2).

I would argue that withdrawal from culture and society is not a sign of confidence but of insecurity and a lack of inner strength.

It seems that Daniel was prepared to take his part in Babylonian society. Even having a Babylonian name of Belteshazzar which literally means ‘Bel (the chief Babylonian God) protect his life’. He assimilated a lot of Babylonian culture and customs up to a point. But even he drew a line.

Throughout the centuries believers have had to take their stand knowing that it might mean loss, perhaps suffering and martyrdom. Remember the story of Eric Liddell, immortalised in the film Chariots of Fire, and how after he had refused to run on the Sabbath he was handed a biblical text before he ran the 400 metres in the 1924 Olympics. The text was from 1 Samuel 2.30 ‘G*od honours those who honour him*’. Whatever is meant by this text it is not that God always grants safety and protection.

Yet it sometimes does happen and your faith sees the hand of God at work. The stand of faith can inspire quite unexpected attitudes in the friends and foes. Those who have to hold together the claims of faith and the claims of the world are encouraged to remember that God has been known to make it possible for people to live in this world in accordance with faith’s claims.

So Daniel took his stand. For him to avoid the risk of defilement Ashpenaz his mentor would have to allow him to abstain from the royal food. Ashpenaz is sympathetic to Daniels position (maybe God was at work changing his heart towards Daniel?). But sympathy cannot be translated into support until Daniel can show that Ashpenaz himself is not about to be endangered. Perhaps Daniel will after all be driven into compromise and despair?

Divine aid does not mean there is no need for the exercise of human responsibility and initiative: rather it opens the way to it.

So Daniel proposes a series of testing to demonstrate that the vegetarian diet he seeks, free from the risk of uncleanliness, can be as healthy as the official provision. What he is doing is saying that I am not posing a threat to the Babylonian culture – I just want to be me. It will not be to your detriment.

Ashpenaz agrees to this and the test is successful. The message of the story is that with cunning and courage it is possible to be faithful in a pagan court. Indeed as the story of Daniel develops it is possible to even be successful there.

Where are the challenges to your faith – in the home, the workplace, the school, the community? Where are your Nebuchadnezzar’s? Are you in danger of letting faith slip – letting it become an irrelevance – a dispensable accessory? Are there times when you have to do a Daniel and draw a line beyond which you are not prepared to go?

Are you in danger of losing your distinctiveness as a Christian? Maybe there is a debate to be had about what makes us distinctive as Christians?

There used to be a poster that showed a judge peering over the bar pointing his finger and the caption was ‘if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?’

The church in the past and also in the present has often got caught up in producing rules and lists for how to be distinctive as a Christian. Don’t smoke, don’t get drunk, don’t do drugs, don’t have sex before your married, and don’t swear. There are arguments to say all those ‘rules’ have something to commend them. However rules never motivated anyone. Finding a good life, a life worth living, the life of Christ, hopefully is what motivates

Walter Brueggemann says’ People are to changed by moral exhortation but by transformed imagination’.

Homer Simpson that great caricature of a modern man once exclaimed, ‘I’m having the best day of my life, and I owe it all to not going to church’. How many people in our society does Homer speak for? The tragic truth is that are churches are often known for what we are against than who we are for. Ask people in the street to cite what the church opposed to and they will give you a long list. Ask them about the things the church is for and they will struggle. Have we become defined by our disdain? That’s the danger if we do a Daniel too often and with no grace and generosity of spirit.

Drawing on the salt analogy: are we worth our salt?

Salt enhances flavour and taste. Flavourless salt is fit for nothing, not even fertilizer. Do we add something to the life of our community?

Salt removes impurities, leaches out bitterness, but also preserves and resists decay. Do we make people’s lives more palatable, less bitter?

Salt holds a colour dye in cloth, remains behind when snow melts or water evaporates. Do we have that staying power, keeping on when others would give p?

Salt raises the freezing point and helps ice to melt. Do we bring warmth of love to chilly situations and cool relationships?

Salt aids buoyancy, helping to float in the sea do we hold up those who are sinking with the weight of anxiety or despair?

Salt is nature’s healer, as an antiseptic, soothing sores. Do we help the heling and recovery of people bruised and wounded in body or spirit?

What good is salt that has lost its saltiness? Are we worth our salt?

We will work out that life of faith in our own conscience before God. Each of us may have different points were we draw the line and say because of my faith I can’t go along with that, just as Daniel did. But like Daniel, can we still find a way forward to play our part in the good of society and the love of God through our love for our fellow human being?

May God helps us to be true to our faith in our Lord and Saviour.

ALTERNATIVE ENDING

Every week we pray the Lord’s Prayer and I would suggest there is enough in it to give you a check list on what is distinctive about being a Christian.

For a start we believe in God. Our Father. There is something more to life and someone to whom we belong and who cares for us, hence the term of endearment and paternity ‘Father’.

God’s name is to be hallowed or made holy. How do we do that? First century society was patriarchal, male dominated. The head of the household was spoken of as male. So how does one judge whether a father, a householder, was a good householder? By how the household is run. Are the children taken care of? Does everybody get enough? Are some pampered with off shore bank accounts whilst others suffer? Is this household in good shape?

To ask God to make God’s name holy is to ask God to make the world into a good household. So comes the next petition: ‘your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’.

Give us this day our daily bread. Not just give ‘me’ this day my daily bread. A Christian distinctive is that we are concerned that all have enough, not just looking after ourselves. In our increasingly self-centred narcissistic world a Christian is called to be different by being concerned not only for themselves but working and praying that all may receive their daily bread.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Christians should be distinctive because of our willingness to forgive and our humility in acknowledging our failures and need for forgiveness. It is an attitude that prevents self-righteousness, that thinks we are better than anyone else. It is an attitude that encourages tolerance and mercy because no one is perfect.

Trespasses could also be interpreted as sins or debts. The latter may have an economic interpretation, so that we pray for no one to be enslaved by economic misfortune – crippling debts and economic impoverishment.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Tolerance does not mean approval or unthinking acceptance. Christians are distinctive because we are called to righteousness - right living – living in a way that brings fullness of life for us and others.

There are many temptations in life that can lead to destructive living. The church in the past and also in the present has often got caught up in producing rules and lists. Don’t smoke, don’t get drunk, don’t do drugs, don’t have sex before your married, and don’t swear. There are arguments to say all those ‘rules’ have something to commend them. However rules never motivated anyone. Finding a good life, a life worth living, the life of Christ, hopefully is what motivates.

‘Lead us not into temptation’ is trying to avoid those things that may hinder that full life. So it calls on Christians to be distinctive by asking the question constantly: is this good for my life? Is this good for my soul? Is this pleasing God? Is my behaviour and lifestyle leading others astray and harming other people’s faith and life?

Deliver us from evil could be ‘deliver us from doing evil’ but also from ‘being under the power of evil’ – the powers that rule over us, dominate us, control us and lead us into harm and away from God. We need discernment and protection.

The Lord’s Prayer is a summary of what matters most to Jesus. When we pray this prayer we are praying for what he was passionate about. We are praying for God’s dream for the world and we are enlisting into participation in that passion of God and committing to a distinctive lifestyle in pursuit of it.

We will work out that life of faith in our own conscience before God. Each of us may have different points were we draw the line and say because of my faith I can’t go along with that, just as Daniel did. But like Daniel, can we still find a way forward to play our part in the good of society and the love of God through our love for our fellow human being?

May God helps us to be true to our faith in our Lord and Saviour.

1. Steve Chalke, *Intelligent Church*, Zondervan, 2006, p37-38 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)