



The Extra Man Daniel 3

I want to start this morning by talking about football. Now most of you know that sport isn't exactly my thing but I sometimes enjoy watching it. Yesterday afternoon I was doing some housework and the telly was on and the football results were coming through. It seems that it was a pretty dirty afternoon. 22 men were sent off in league. Of course in football, the sent off man goes for an early shower and prepares for a telling off from the manager and his fellow players when they get back into the dressing room. It's different in rugby. The sent off man has to go into the sin bin for 10 minutes so he gets a chance to come back on and redeem himself.

The problem for the team is that when the man is off the pitch, the opposition have an advantage – they have one more than them – they have an extra man.

The idea of the Extra Man in sport is a common one. Teams with a really vibrant group of supporters can make a big difference to how the team plays that it is often said that good supporters is like having an extra man. Or for that matter a good manager. I keep an eye on Tottenham Hotspur. They were really bad at the start of the season but since they got a new manager, it's been said that it's like having an extra man.

The extra man means advantage – it places you in a position of strength that you would otherwise not be in. It won't have passed your notice what I'm actually referring to in relation to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in this morning's story – they got an "extra man" in the midst of their trip into the fiery furnace.

In my previous sermon a fortnight ago we were introduced to these three and also to Daniel – Strangers in a Strange Land. They were young men who had been groomed for public service by Nebuchadnezzar, Emperor of Babylon. The purpose was to get the best of all the lands he had conquered as well as trying to integrate nations into his empire. And these three guys had made it as they were high up in the government of the province of Babylon – the province that the city was in and where Nebuchadnezzar had his palace. They were amazingly important people which goes to show how effective they had become. Why? We know the answer from last time: because they were prepared to trust God and put Him first even though they were strangers in a strange land. So there we have it – three Jews in charge of a province full of people who were culturally and racially quite different from them. Interesting and as we shall see, potentially a problem.

That's one of the themes in Daniel – God places us in a world that is at the least ambivalent and at the worst hostile to Him. And He calls us to serve Him there. We often see our Christianity and Christian service in terms of church but in truth we spend most of our lives in the world – and God calls on us to honour and serve Him there. And we saw last time that if we are determined to honour Him in that, He blesses us through it – and we become a blessing to others.

And they all lived happily ever after? Of course not. There were plenty of people who resented the fact that these Jews – these conquered people – had gotten to be in charge of the key province in the Empire. They resented it and looked for an opportunity to discredit them and the statue on the plain of Dura was that opportunity. We know the rest of the story – so what do we learn?

Opposition always comes with the territory

It doesn't matter how much we are determined to serve the Lord in our jobs or in our homes or wherever, sooner or later problems will come that will challenge our faith and threaten our witness. Satan loves to get us into situations where our credibility and integrity is threatened because it destroys our witness and discourages us. And he often uses people's potential for jealousy or just to make mischief to do it.

It all started with Nebuchadnezzar's own vanity to make this enormous image. That's the tool Satan used to get at Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. It was meant to be a celebration of his greatness and the greatness of his gods and he wanted all the people in the province of Babylon to bow to it. The province was the centre of government and life of Babylon. It was a cosmopolitan place with the city being the greatest on earth at that time with the Hanging Gardens later being described as one of the seven wonders of the world. And Nebuchadnezzar wanted to make sure that people recognised his greatness. If you look at the dimensions the stature was like an enormous totem pole. The artist in my picture has got it a bit out of scale. It was meant to be visible and by people bowing to it would be an act of fealty to him. And they all did it – except for our three heroes who were conspicuous by their absence.

Why – because their first loyalty was to God. Yes, they served Nebuchadnezzar and that was fine, but to bow to the image and attribute his achievements to false gods was a step too far – it was immoral and against God's law. But their absence was going to be noticed by their political enemies.

This sort of thing is par for the course for Christians. We need to understand that when we follow Christ we follow Him into battle not into an easy life. And it is often on the grounds of us having to stand for our integrity and what is right is when we come into conflict with others – it can happen it will happen. In work, you will be asked to do something that is wrong – lie for the boss, be encouraged to steal time, nick things from the office, do a shoddy job because others do it. In a family situation it can be worse. I know that many of you have the frustration that so often you can't get to church or do things with the church because your partner doesn't like it, or that things in your family, particularly on a Sunday conflict.

It does happen; it will happen. But when it does and we allow God to take us through it, we grow and He gets the glory – but as our heroes found out – things can get rather hot in the process.

Don't take the easy option

The most obvious option for our heroes in this instance would have been to give in. It's what often happens when Christians hit moral dilemmas. If it isn't significant and we don't think people will notice, we give in. If everyone else is doing it – like other Christians – we think it's OK too. There were many Jews that were trained for Nebuchadnezzar's court, but only four made a stand – Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

The message is simple – don't take the easy option. These guys had built their reputation on their trust in God and their integrity. Now they were being faced with a test of that. Taking the easy option may have seemed OK but would have destroyed their integrity totally because their lives would not have matched their words. They knew it, their enemies knew it and Satan knew it.

How many times have you come across people who claim to be Christians, yet their behaviour doesn't seem to match? My wife's family have been put off Christianity by the way they've seen us treated at the hands of churches over the years. Christians make mistakes, yes; we're not all perfect; yes – but the whole of our witness in our work, in our family circle and in our neighbourhood can be destroyed by us following the crowd and dishonouring God.

So one way or another, there wasn't an easy option at all. They were ruined if they did bow and ruined if they didn't. Sometimes decisions seem to fall that way don't they – we seem to have a choice between bad and bad. Where's God when you need him?

Frankly, our heroes had no idea what God was going to do. They just did the right thing, honoured Him and trusted Him. Wow – that's a hairy thing to do. I know – I've tried it! And it works. But it's still pretty hair raising sometimes. Look at their words:

6 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered, “Your Majesty, we will not try to defend ourselves. 17 If the God whom we serve is able to save us from the blazing furnace and from your power, then he will. 18 But even if he doesn’t, Your Majesty may be sure that we will not worship your god, and we will not bow down to the gold statue that you have set up.”

Often people want God to do the miracles in these kinds of situation. He usually does when He pulls someone this close to the wire. But the real measure in their faith was that they were going to honour God even if they did die. They saw honouring God even more important than the ultimate worldly consequence – to be executed.

Are you in a tight fix this morning? Maybe it’s in work. Maybe it’s your family? Maybe things are just bad and you’re looking for a miracle. What will your faith in God be like if you don’t get one? Will you trust God anyway? The quality of our faith is determined not by trusting in what God might do next – but what God has already done for us in Christ. It doesn’t matter what happens on this earth – there is something already laid up for us in heaven.

But I’ll say this – God always honours those who honour Him. My encouragement to you is the encouragement of these men: faced with that moral dilemma – don’t take the easy option – honour God and take His – because He’ll always honour you.

On Friday Napo reminded us of this scripture from Habbakuk. *As the prophet contemplated all the destruction that was coming on the land he said this: 3: 17 Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. 19 God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.*

Take advantage of the “extra man”

I finish with encouragement. Because when they honoured God and stood up to the king, they found that God did not leave them alone – He rescued them and give them company. Whether it was an angel as Nebuchadnezzar said or a manifestation of God Himself we don’t know. All they found was that they didn’t get torched and there was someone else in the furnace with them.

Praise God! He never leaves us alone – we always have His Spirit with us in every situation. God doesn’t desert – He’s right there – strengthening us and carrying us through the situation. Many of us are in situations where we feel alone and where we find standing for Jesus difficult. Remember this – you are not alone – the extra man is right there – in you, part of you and you can lean on Him and depend on Him.

Maybe God is challenging you this morning. Maybe in your work you are going through a dilemma right now. Maybe it’s the nature of your job. Maybe it’s relationships in the workplace. Maybe it’s relationships or situations in your family or your neighbourhood. It could be that you have an easy way out but that by doing it you would dishonour God. What are you going to do? You know the right answer. And God will be with you in it.

We are a fellowship and we are here to support and help one another. If you need help in discerning God’s will in a situation or find it hard to draw on the strength you need to deal with something, then ask someone for help.

Let me finish with a man who did the right thing – he trusted Christ and the Romans martyred him. Bad? Many people came to Christ through his life and through his death. His name was Polycarp

“O Lord God Almighty, the Father of Your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of You, the God of angels and powers and of all creation and of the whole race of the righteous, who live in Your presence;” I bless You for that You have granted me this day and hour, that I might receive a portion amongst the number of martyrs in the cup of Your Christ to resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit.

“May I be received among these in Your presence this day, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as You prepared and revealed it beforehand, and have accomplished it, You who are the faithful and true God.

"For this cause, yes and for all things, I praise You, I bless You, I glorify You, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, through whom with Him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and for the ages to come. Amen."

From The Martyrdom Of Polycarp

*Preached by Mark Reid
MRBCfelixstowe 16/11/08
© Mark Reid 2008
Scripture Quotes TEV*