



I was fascinated to see in these times of recession that the world's most expensive party was held last Thursday in Dubai to celebrate the opening of the Emirate's newest hotel, the Atlantis. Over £20m was spent on the extravaganza including a concert by Kylie Minogue - you'd think that they'd have got a bigger star to go if they were paying all that money for a party!

It's bizarre that such expensive consumption should be reported at a time when people are suffering because of the financial downturn. Not everybody is - the super-rich can still party whilst the rest of the world suffers.

Strangely, our story this morning seems quite prophetic. It concerns another party held as the great city of Babylon was being besieged by the Persian army. The party went on despite the difficult circumstances.

Just a minute, a few weeks ago I was recalling the story in Strangers in a Strange Land of how the great Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had created a huge empire and how he'd educated captured Jewish lads and groomed them for high government. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had made it in high government in Babylon. Daniel had been appointed as a kind of Minister of Divination because of his prophetic ability. He was a valued member of Nebuchadnezzar's court. Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar became rich and powerful.

Yet 65 years later, we have this story of the fall of Babylon. What happened? How could such a great empire collapse? We're not given many details in Daniel as it's assumed that we know the history already. But is well-known so let me fill you in.

Nebuchadnezzar reigned for a long time, but in his latter days went mad and acted like an animal. Actually it was prophesied by Daniel. Our heroes from earlier chapters had a high profile witness, yet the Babylonians did not respond to God's overtures to them by these men. His madness - rather like the madness of George III - was the beginning of the end for Babylon. He understood his sin late on but he died and his empire went into free-fall. Babylonian kings played musical thrones in the same way as the Plantagenets and the Tudors in English history. It was a disaster and the empire began to fall apart politically and economically.

Nebuchadnezzar's son Evil-Merodach reigned in his stead but was deposed by Nergilissar, his brother-in-law after two years. He died four years later and was succeeded by his infant son Labashi-Marduk who reigned nine months before being deposed by priests of Marduk, the Babylonian god led by a priest called Nabonidus who became king. He married one of Nebuchadnezzar's daughters to legitimise his reign. That's why Nebuchadnezzar is referred to as Belshazzar's father - the word father often being used in the OT to refer to ancestors.

He was a very devout follower of Marduk and couldn't be bothered with the responsibilities of office, so he eventually moved to Arabia and left his spineless son Belshazzar as regent. So Belshazzar was in effective control of Babylon as second in power in the kingdom - that's why he offered third in power to whoever interpreted the writing on the wall.

What had happened to Daniel in these intervening years? After Nebuchadnezzar he was sidelined, out of power, pensioned off or whatever. As the pagan priests took

over, people like Daniel who would have no truck with them would have been pushed out of government. For about 20 years Daniel observed from the sidelines.

◆ God has His timing

Daniel: the wilderness years - like Churchill he was out of government and out of favour. That was tough and Daniel learnt that God's purpose for him was measured in years. Time to God doesn't have the immediacy and urgency of humanity. God's span is years and decades rather than months because to Him a thousand years is like a day.

In the past couple of sermons I've encouraged us to look at our jobs, our neighbourhoods and our family situations and to see them as places God wants us to be, places where we serve Him and places where we stand as a witness. Last time we saw how we walk with our extra man, our extra advantages - the Holy Spirit of God.

But I know that many of you struggle even with that knowledge. You try to stand as a Christian, but everything you do seems to be a struggle and never gets you anywhere. You pray for people and situations and nothing seems to happen. That was Daniel for 20 years. After the roller coaster years under Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, now in his later years was watching whilst a load of idiots were making a mess of the country and there was nothing he could do about it. But God could - and did.

It's known in the Bible as perseverance. One of the hard things to do as a Christian is to persevere - wait to do things in God's time. It seems to be such a waste to not be proactive - we live in a world and sometimes with a faith that works by results - so if there aren't any, we think of ourselves useless or unspiritual.

There is nothing wrong with perseverance and we need to understand that we grow in perseverance. Never think that God is not working when we pray and pray and nothing seems to happen. Never think that God isn't bothered when you get into difficulty because you've tried to act with integrity. Never think you are out of favour with God. Never think God's not concerned when you try to be a witness and hit a brick wall. You might think that, but God is growing something within you and something within the people you touch that will come home to roost - but in his time. And His time moves more slowly than yours or mine. He is wise and knows His purposes.

◆ God can bring radical change

And for Daniel times were a-changing. Cyrus King of Persia recognised the political instability and the weakness of Nabonidus and Belshazzar's government and invaded Babylonia. Nabonidus led the army against Cyrus but in 539BC lost. Cyrus then marched on Babylon where Belshazzar was in command, and besieged it.

And what was Belshazzar doing whilst the most powerful army in the world at that time was laying siege to the city? What a cool dude. He was having a party! He was the king of parties! Why let the party pooper Cyrus spoil their fun? Babylon had massive defences and the natural defence of the River Euphrates which was deep and impassable. He thought that by a combination of those defences and trust in his gods of wood, metal and stone he could keep the Persians out. So hang cool, man - let's show that boring old Cyrus how we can party! Cyrus was unimpressed and described Belshazzar as a coward because he was happy to hide behind his city walls thinking he couldn't be beaten. He thought his god Marduk would protect him.

That's where chapter 5 starts. Our scene opens with Belshazzar's party to celebrate his gods, and he needs to drink out of some bling. What bling? The best bling they had: the gold and silver contents of the temple in Jerusalem - including the items from the holy place. Aargh! He sums up 20 years of disrespect and rejection for the God Nebuchadnezzar had least come to respect by profaning the

temple vessels celebrating another god. The party was in full swing when their party is gate-crashed; not by Cyrus but by God.

That was it - the party was ruined. Belshazzar was so terrified by the image of this hand appearing and writing on the wall of his palace that his knees knocked!

And the writing said - Mene, mene, tekel, parsin. What did it mean? In Daniel, the words we are given are in were in Belshazzar's own language - Aramaic - mene, mene, tekel, parsin. The GNB gave us a translation to start with: Number, number, weight, division. Why couldn't Belshazzar understand it? It was probably written in an alphabet they didn't recognise.

Actually, all the words were something to do with money and value. Once Daniel gave them what the words were they registered it: Mene (literally, numbered) - related to their unit of currency - the Mina. Tekel (literally weighed) was a measure of weight like the Israelite shekel and was used to assay gold and silver - like say the carat is used to assay gold and diamonds today. Parsin (literally divided) is the mina divided in two. So if Belshazzar had been a modern British monarch he would have got the words Pound, Pound, Carat, 50p, probably written in an alphabet like ancient Aramaic which no-one can understand anyway!

Confused? That's what Belshazzar was and so were all the soothsayers and magicians he called up - it was crisis. Everyone knew the hand was a divine sign and it was dire. But who could read and interpret?

And it's at that point that how Daniel helped Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel - forgotten for 20 years, unfashionable, kicked into touch - and God opened the door for him to speak His word again.

If you are prepared to be faithful in the place God has called you, then the way will be opened one day for God to use you. Like Daniel, what will happen will be possibly even in a way you don't expect. You'll be the person that has the answer.

Be ready, be willing to let God use you to speak His word as he brings you a need to minister to.

◆ God honours those who honour Him

For Daniel the answer to what the writing on the wall meant was awful. Beshazzar's use of the temple gold and silver was symptomatic of Babylonian leaders since Nebuchadnezzar to ignore God and trust their own gods. Now was the reckoning. Daniel was to give the king the unpopular message that I'm sure his soothsayers weren't telling him.

25 "This is what was written: 'Number, number, weight, divisions.' 26 And this is what it means: number, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; 27 weight, you have been weighed on the scales and found to be too light; 28 divisions, your kingdom is divided up and given to the Medes and Persians."

It's like being on the boating lake. You pay your pound for a half hour and at the end, you hear the call "come in number 5, your time is up!" His time was up. He wasn't going to survive as king. Worse, in the assayers scales he'd come up light - he was a fraud, a cheat, a counterfeit - and his kingdom was going to be chopped up and given to the Medes and the Persians - the word Peres is a pun for Persian.

Belshazzar didn't find God that night - he found death. But for Daniel, God's faithful servant, his years of faithful waiting meant that in his latter years he was more influential than he ever was under Nebuchadnezzar. Why?

Let's get the rest of the story. Whilst Belshazzar was pfaing about the writing on the wall, Cyrus was busy diverting the River Euphrates - Babylon's natural defence.

As a result the river level dropped allowing his army to march into the city during the night almost unopposed. And what did he find? He found Daniel, newly promoted to third in command in Babylonia for correctly prophesying that Cyrus would be victorious.

So what did Cyrus do? He made Babylon part of the Kingdom of the Medes, under his brother in law who history records was 62 years of age. His name was Gambuk but we know him as Darius the Mede. Darius was so impressed with Daniel that he promoted him to high office. In his eighties, Daniel went on to shape another empire and give Jews a high profile in Cyrus' Persian empire. Just a minute, wasn't Cyrus the guy who allowed the Jews home after their captivity? He must have got a good image of Jews. But where from? His brother in law Darius' Prime Minister? We can only speculate..

What do we learn? When the going gets tough, stick in there, because God can and will use you in ways that you never expected. He wants to use you to bring blessing to your office, your family, your friends, your neighbourhood. Look for the Holy Spirit to do the unexpected Persevere, be available and seize the opportunities that God gives you.

Prayer

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