

## 2. Engaging with Society

### Passage – Daniel 4:1-37

I wonder if you suffer from bad dreams – and if you do I wonder if you attach any significance to them

As Westerners coming from a materialist culture which gives little thought to the supernatural there is a tendency to dismiss all dreams as meaningless – or at most as just reflecting our subconscious state

The Bible in fact affirms that our subconscious can provoke bad dreams – as the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us ‘a dream comes when there are many cares’ (Ec 5:3)

But Scripture does not support the idea that all dreams are merely psychological – some are prophetic

‘When a prophet of the Lord is among you I speak to him in dreams’ (Numbers 12:5)

Or in Job 33:14-15 – ‘For God does speak in a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls upon man... he may terrify them with warnings’

And we can all think of OT Scriptural examples – Jacob, Joseph, Pharaoh, the Midianite soldier at the time of Gideon – then there are the NT dreams of Mary, Pilate’s wife, Peter and Paul

Well Nebuchadnezzar in this chapter we have just read has a prophetic dream – his second thus far – following the dream of the statue in chapter 2

And it terrifies him – and none of his wise men can explain it so Daniel is asked to give an interpretation

In this book we have already seen Nebuchadnezzar act angrily and irrationally after his dream in chapter 2 – and it’s a reminder that leaders of vast empires are rather prone to this sort of reaction – we have seen examples of it last century in the likes of Stalin, Hitler and Ceausescu

Self-control was not a strong suit for Nebuchadnezzar – he was impulsive, suspicious and petulant and liable to lash out at innocent parties when he felt threatened.

The lives of Daniel and his friends had already been under threat from Nebuchadnezzar in ch 2 and 3 of this book (We’ll come back to chapter 3 later today).

We all have to work under authority – and sometimes that authority can be unreasonably demanding and unjust

I’m sure we can all think of examples from our own medical training or maybe even our current jobs

What is particularly striking here is the way Daniel reacts both in chapter 2 and chapter 4

First notice what he does not do

- He does not get angry himself – just as well as with Nebuchadnezzar it would surely have only made things worse
- He didn't resort to gossip or slander
- He didn't organise a rebellion by encouraging people to fight back
- But neither did he argue or cower in fear
- He was not intimidated by the abuse of power

In chapter 2 when Nebuchadnezzar is threatening to kill all his astrologers along with Daniel and his friends for failing to give him both the dream and its interpretation – Daniel recognises both that the king's accusations are unjust and unfair and seeks to gather information to understand why the king is reacting this way

Then he prays for help and receives from God both the dream of the statue and its interpretation.

He behaves the same way in chapter 4 and again gets the interpretation from God

But note particularly Daniel's deep concern for the king (v19) and his loyalty to this demagogue.

Beltshazzar answered and said, "My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies! ... "

He describes how the king is going to be humbled by a mental illness

And then he pleads with him to repent (v27)

*"Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity."*

Well of course the King doesn't repent and as a result is struck down by this illness which William Blake has immortalised in this extraordinary painting

The clinical features of the king's illness have interested psychiatrists down the ages:

It was characterised by rapid onset (v33), with spontaneous remission after an unspecified interval (v34). His behaviour (eating grass and allowing his hair and nails to grow long) is suggestive of lycanthropy; a delusion in which the patient believes himself to be an animal. An extreme kind of body dysmorphia.

This may be caused – apparently - by a variety of psychiatric conditions including a depressive illness, schizophrenia, mania, an organic brain syndrome or a hysterical (dissociative) state.

Despite Daniel's warning to 'renounce [his] sins by doing what is right, and [his] wickedness by being kind to the oppressed' (v27), the proud leader of Babylon refuses to humble himself and repent and his illness fulfils the prophecy:

*'You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.'*

The incident is a sober warning about human pride... but also a testimony to divine mercy and sovereignty – even over that most frightening of prospects – mental illness.

The result after Nebuchadnezzar's healing is striking – he praises and honours God (v34-35)

*At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honoured him who lives for ever,*

*for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;  
<sup>35</sup> all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,  
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven  
and among the inhabitants of the earth;  
and none can stay his hand  
or say to him, "What have you done?"*

And his sanity and Kingdom is restored – in fact this seems almost to be a religious conversion or at very least an acknowledgement of God as the King of the universe

The Bible teaches us, not least in this book, that God raises up kings (Daniel 4:17, 25; Isaiah 40:23; Acts 17:26)

He also holds them accountable – all Kings and authorities will have to answer to him (Psalm 82)

The NT reminds us that God institutes all civil authorities and expects us to obey them (Romans 13:1-7)

We should obey them... (Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1)

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.<sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. (Romans 13:1,2)*

*Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work,<sup>2</sup> to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy towards all people. (Titus 3:1-2)*

Daniel's attitude to authority and willingness to serve even a despot like Nebuchadnezzar speaks volumes about his citizenship

Daniel belonged to God's Kingdom but was also a good citizen of the country God had placed him in

He was accordingly promoted within that foreign Kingdom like Joseph, Mordecai and Nehemiah were before him

He used the skills he gained to serve the people of his adopted country

Christians are not called to be rebels overthrowing governments, even bad and corrupt governments – but to be an influence for good in them and to trust judgement to God.

We see exactly the same attitudes expressed in the NT. Jesus did not start a revolution or seek to overthrow the Romans. He told his disciples to pay their taxes and the epistles are full of instruction to respect authority and to be a good and reliable worker – even if one happens to be a slave working for an unreasonable master

In fact Paul enjoins the Colossians to serve as Christ himself served and to treat their masters as if they were Christ himself

*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him... Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.’ (Colossians 3:17-24)*

This was a lesson I found very difficult to learn during my surgical training – may give testimony here if time about Tony Hardy etc

And I suspect that was God gave me so many unreasonable bosses to work for to teach me this lesson – I was a stropky employee at various times - and now regret that

Our work is in fact an intrinsic part of our worship to God – as much as prayer or Bible study.

Daniel and his friends faced two key temptations which we also face today.

### **Daniel’s temptations**

The first temptation was simply to compromise and become no different from those around them.

We looked at the issue of daring to be different in our last talk and we are going to return to the issue of counting the cost in the next one.

The second temptation was to retreat into an escapist spiritual ghetto – to seek solace with like-minded believers and to leave the world to its own devices.

But like Daniel we are called instead to be fully engaged with the society into which we have been placed –to be both 'salt and light' – penetrating and flavouring (Matthew 5:13-16) and to 'shine like stars' (Philippians 2:15) – to stand out as morally different.

So instead of disengagement and compromise, Daniel and his friends were called to engagement and distinctiveness.

### **Engagement and distinctiveness**

Becoming engaged with the society in which they were exiles involved some degree of conformity.

As we saw yesterday in Daniel 1:3-7 that Daniel and his friends were:

- selected for a period of rigorous training
- taken apart from home and family
- had to acquire new language and skills
- employed by the state in a privileged position

- faced pressures to conform to the society in which they had been placed
- given new godlike names
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They learnt a trade, adopted clothing and culture, learnt a new language, served in a secular state.

In fact the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the exiles early on in their stay and urged them, including Daniel and his friends, to become fully engaged with their new society, whilst maintaining their distinctiveness as believers faithful to God - to be truly in the world but not of the world.

The latter half of Jeremiah's letter is very well known and frequently quoted from by Christians mostly completely out of context.

Jeremiah 29:11-14

*<sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*

But we need to look at the passage that leads directly into it - *Jeremiah 29:1-10*

*'These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon... It said: <sup>4</sup> "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup> Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. <sup>8</sup> For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, <sup>9</sup> for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord. <sup>10</sup> "For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. (Jeremiah 29:1-10)*

- *Build houses and live in them*
- *Plant gardens and eat their produce*
- *Take wives... and multiply*
- *Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you in exile*
- *I promise to bring you back to Jerusalem*

And so Daniel sustained by this hope and promise worked hard and effectively *within* the alien Babylonian system and was rewarded with great responsibility for his integrity and commitment.

*Daniel 6:3-4 – 'Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. They tried to find grounds for charges against him in his conduct of government affairs but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent'*

The time is now 539 BC, so Daniel has been in service for 65 years since 604 BC and is probably over 80 years old.

His friends displayed the same integrity and the Bible makes it very clear where these qualities came from.

*Daniel 1:17-20 – 'To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning... The king talked with them, and he found none equal to (them) so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.'*

And the result?

*Daniel 3:30 – 'Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.'*

There is nothing wrong with Christians getting into influential positions of authority. In fact it enables us to do great good. But the key thing is to make sure that it is God and not selfish ambition that puts us there. If we have to compromise to get there we will have to compromise to stay there. On the other hand, if God puts us there we can be a powerful influence for good...

For much of biblical history God's people have lived as exiles and have worked in state systems. As well as Daniel and his friends Joseph, Esther, Mordecai and Nehemiah also served in state systems in the great empires of Egypt, Media and Persia.

The early Christians lived at the time when the Roman Empire was dominant and throughout the last twenty centuries have served in state systems and empires all over the world.

We should work to the best of our abilities within the system in which we're placed, and value the good of the organisation in which we work. In doing this we not only obey the principles in Jeremiah 29, but also uphold the high view of work given to us in Genesis 1.

As God's 'stewards' we are entrusted with gifts, training, resources and held responsible to care for his world as he himself cares for it (Genesis 1:28). We should make an effort to help with particular priorities in our organisation, striving to improve the quality of its work. This might include providing leadership, balancing the finances, learning management processes, and promoting what our organisation does.

The worldview and values on which New Zealand was originally built come from nineteenth century Britain so we cannot understand the history and roots of our own country without understanding a little of British history.

Britain's Christian values were revived by the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformation, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century puritanism that drove the Pilgrim fathers and the non-conformist movement, and by the 18<sup>th</sup> century evangelical revival under Wesley and Whitefield (and parallel Great Awakening in America).

The evangelical revival led both to the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform catalysed by the likes of William Wilberforce and the Clapham sect and also to the 19<sup>th</sup> missionary movement, beginning with Carey in 1793, which profoundly shaped the Christian culture of the British Empire.

Note the year here. This is shortly after Captain James Cook visited New Zealand and also just after the American War of Independence – during the reign of Mad King George III.

What made William Wilberforce tick was a profound biblical allegiance to what he called the 'peculiar doctrines' of Christianity. These, he said, give rise, in turn, to true affections – what we might call 'passion' or 'emotions' – for spiritual things, which, in turn, break the power of pride and greed and fear, and then lead to transformed morals which, in turn, lead to the political welfare of the nation.

In other words Wilberforce's political ambitions - and principally his lifelong commitment to abolishing slavery - were the direct product of his evangelical Christian faith. He said, 'If . . . a principle of true Religion [ie. true Christianity] should . . . gain ground, there is no estimating the effects on public morals, and the consequent influence on our political welfare.'

Wilberforce believed with all his heart that new affections for God were the key to new morals and lasting political reformation. And these new affections and this reformation did not come from mere ethical systems. They came from what he called the 'peculiar doctrines' of Christianity. For Wilberforce, practical deeds were born in 'peculiar doctrines'. By that term he simply meant the central distinguishing doctrines of human depravity, divine judgment, the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross, justification by faith alone, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and the practical necessity of fruit in a life devoted to good deeds.

The sweeping political and social reforms witnessed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain and culminating in the Welfare state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century started with Christian revival in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They also had a huge influence in shaping New Zealand's culture and history.

The British Prime Minister David Cameron gave a quite remarkable speech on 2011 to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible in 1611. Its still available on the Downing Street website.

Cameron confessed to being only a 'vaguely practising Church of England Christian' who was 'full of doubts and, like many, constantly grappling with the difficult questions when

it comes to some of the big theological issues’.

But his stated aim in the speech was to present his personal conviction that ‘The King James Bible is as relevant today as at any point in its 400 year history’ and that ‘none of us should be frightened of recognising this’.

He gave three reasons for this conviction:

*First, the King James Bible has bequeathed a body of language that permeates every aspect of our culture and heritage... from everyday phrases to our greatest works of literature, music and art. We live and breathe the language of the King James Bible, sometimes without even realising it.*

*Second, just as our language and culture is steeped in the Bible, so too is our politics. From human rights and equality to our constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy... from the role of the church in the first forms of welfare provision, to the many modern day faith-led social action projects...*

*Third, we are a Christian country. And we should not be afraid to say so... and the Bible has helped to give Britain a set of values and morals which make Britain what it is today.*

He then set out to elaborate on these three points.

In support of the first he gave a long list of ways in which the Bible had influenced literature, music and art – in which Shakespeare, Tennyson, Bach, Handel and Michelangelo were amongst the highlights.

Expounding the second he argued that the Judeo-Christian roots of the Bible provided ‘the foundations for protest and for the evolution of our freedom and democracy’, placed the ‘first limits on Royal Power’ and that ‘the knowledge that God created man in his own image was... a game changer for the cause of human dignity and equality’.

But it was the third section on Christian values that was probably the most interesting. Here Cameron argued that ‘the Bible has helped to shape the values which define our country’. He quoted Margaret Thatcher who once said, ‘we are a nation whose ideals are founded on the Bible’ and then gave a list of Christian values including ‘responsibility, hard work, charity, compassion, humility, self-sacrifice, love...pride in working for the common good and honouring the social obligations we have to one another, to our families and our communities...’

This provided the framework for an analysis of the cause of problems as diverse as the financial crash, the London riots and the MPs’ expenses scandal which he claimed were evidence of the ‘absence of any real accountability, or moral code’. He concluded that ‘one thing is clear: moral neutrality or passive tolerance just isn’t going to cut it anymore’.

Of course there were things he *didn’t say* – especially with respect to the Christian values that he himself left out.

First there was no mention of the importance of respecting the right of Christians to live

according to Christian conscience, of the sanctity of human life or of the biblical model of marriage .

Most crucially, there was no reference to the foundation on which all Christian values are based, Jesus Christ's divinity, incarnation, death and resurrection, the need for repentance and faith and his imminent return in judgement.

The journalist Melanie McDonagh recently made this final point in the Spectator magazine 'Cameron's missing the point: Christian values require Christianity':

*'Mr Cameron's remarks about Christian values fail to get to the heart of the contemporary moral malaise. Look, Christian values flow from Christianity. Without those beliefs in the God who became man, and who died for sinners and rose from the dead, and forgave sins, the moral values don't count for much. It's because of who and what Christ was that we take to heart what he said about loving our enemies, turning the other cheek. Values aren't something free-floating; they come from what we believe. So when Mr Cameron says we should return to Christian values, he misses the point. What we need – with all respect to other faiths – is a return to Christianity.'*

But in recognising at very least the profound effect that Christianity has had in shaping British and New Zealand culture Cameron was just being true to history.

Britain's Christian history as well as shaping its language, culture, laws has also shaped its institutions – not least its medical schools and hospitals.

Christian involvement in healthcare has a long pedigree in the UK and elsewhere, stretching back to the monastic hospitals of the medieval period.

Many of the major hospitals which provided the foundations for the NHS in Britain were originally set up by Christians. St Bartholomew's, St Thomas', St Mary's and St George's are examples just in London. Similarly many of the country's leading medical schools began with Christian initiatives. The same can be said about US. Many of the first hospitals were built by those who followed the Pilgrim Fathers.

And Britain is where those who build New Zealand's medical schools and hospitals did their postgraduate training.

Plug 'the book that made your world' here by Vishal Mangalwadi.

New Zealand is not the least corrupt country in the world because of atheism or secular humanism – it is the legacy of its Christian heritage. This is why our national anthem is full of the Gospel and our national flag – at least currently – is covered in crosses – both in the Union Jack and in the Southern cross itself.

Similarly the loss of Christian faith has had profound consequences for society – eg. Breakdown Britain - The five pathways to poverty as popularised by past British PM Iain Duncan-Smith.

– Family breakdown

- Economic dependency
- Indebtedness
- Addiction
- Educational failure

We can trace this same impact of the Christian faith on history in a huge number of different countries.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable is the way that Christianity essentially took over and replaced the Roman Empire in just three centuries. At the time that the Emperor Constantine's mother became a committed believer in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century it is said that about 10% of Roman citizens were Christian believers.

A more recent example is the utter transformation of the nation of South Korea

In Yanghwajin Foreigners' Cemetery in Seoul are 145 graves belonging to Christian missionaries and their families who dedicated their lives to Korea during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of the best known in South Korea today is an American nurse called Ruby Kendrick who died shortly after arriving in the country, but who said that if there had been a thousand Koreas she would have given her life to them all.

These missionaries profoundly influenced Korean society, not only by establishing hospitals and schools, but by being God's agents in far-reaching spiritual revival which transformed the soul of the nation, abolished class hierarchy and laid the framework for remarkable cultural and economic development.

Within twenty years of the arrival of the first resident Protestant missionary, early stirrings of a great revival began to sweep through the staid Presbyterian and Methodist beginnings of missionary effort.

The climax came in 1907 with 'extraordinary manifestations of power', that reminded observers of the revivals of John Wesley. Church membership leapt upward, quadrupling in the five years between 1903 and 1908.

Today South Korea ranks 7th in the world with respect to numbers of Christians in the country. In addition, over 21,000 Korean missionaries serve in 175 countries, making South Korea second only to the US as a missionary sending nation.

The cultural influence of this explosive growth has been immense. Christians have started 293 schools and 40 universities including three of the top five academic institutions.

Traditional Korean society was hierarchically arranged according to Confucian principles under the semi-divine emperor. Women had no social rights, children were totally subservient to their parents, and individuals had no rights except as defined by the overall social system.

This structure was challenged by the Christian teaching that all human beings are created in the image of God and thus that every one of them is equal and has essential worth.

Many South Korean Christians also view their faith as a key factor in the country's dramatic economic growth over the past three decades, believing that its success and prosperity are indications of God's blessing and the product of a strong protestant work ethic.

We may soon see similar things happening in North Korea, where a new university (PUST) has been built on the very spot where one of the first missionaries, a Welshman called Robert Germain Thomas, was martyred in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

So how do we engage as Christian doctors?

One way to engage is to become involved in management structures and work on improving the system. The latest NHS reforms in the UK have given more opportunities to GPs particularly. Indeed every doctor is a manager to a greater or lesser extent; principles around integrity and seeking the good of our workplace are no different when applied to management tasks than when applied to patient care.

Part of seeking that prosperity is praying. Do we have a prayer group in our workplace if there are other Christians? If so, we may well pray for our patients and ourselves, but how often do we pray for the health of the organisation, or the managers?

Christians are urged not only to pray for 'all those in authority' (1 Timothy 2:1-2) but also to be subject to them: 'to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander non-one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show humility to all men' (Titus 3:1-2). We are also to serve them, as noted, 'with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord...as working for the Lord and not for men' (Colossian 3:22-25).

Loving as Christ loved and treating others as if they were Christ himself.

As we have noted Christian involvement in healthcare has a long pedigree.

Many Christians will quite rightly choose to continue to work in the state healthcare institutions, but with the global financial crisis and burgeoning national debt there are also going to be more opportunities for Christians – to provide healthcare and health education in innovative ways – through churches, communities, charities and corporate bodies alongside those institutions provided by the state.

The Chinese character for 'crisis' is made up of two other characters – 'threat' and 'opportunity'.

If the health system is in crisis then of course it poses a threat to us – but it will also give more opportunities for Christians and for explicitly Christian organisations to provide healthcare and health education.

The astronomical growth of charitable Christian initiatives currently in the UK in the face of the economic recession - foodbanks, street-pastoring, debt counselling, crisis pregnancy counselling, drug and alcohol rehabilitation - represent Christians beginning to rise to that challenge – but there is unlimited potential by God’s grace for much greater initiatives by Christians churches, communities, charities and corporate bodies.

Christians should be deeply engaged in society – like the Babylonian exiles to be seeking the good of the city in which we live – because God himself has put it in place.

Are there limits to that involvement – well yes there are- and that is the subject we’ll be dealing with in the next talk. We are not of the world – but we do need to be deeply engaged in it and seeking its welfare.

### **Conclusions**

Daniel cared deeply for the king of Babylon and served him faithfully

He was a good citizen

This was part of his service to God

We should all seek the good of the city in which we live