

23rd June 2024 – Daniel 1 ‘Drawing the wise line’

Later this summer, Paris will host the 2024 Olympic Games – exactly a century after it last hosted the Games. One of the iconic stories of those 1924 Games, immortalised by the film *Chariots of Fire*, is that of Eric Liddell. Liddell was one of the favourites to win the blue riband event of the games, the 100m, but knew months in advance that the heats were scheduled for a Sunday.

Liddell was a devout Christian who took the idea of Sabbath very seriously. In a much talked-about choice in the media at the time, he decided not to run in his favoured event, and run in the 200m and 400m instead. Indeed, such was the anticipation regarding Liddell’s performance, the British Olympic Association even tried to make the hosts change the date of the event, so Liddell could compete against his friend and rival Harold Abrahams. The attempt failed, and Liddell, whose 400m times in the run-up to the games were not all that promising, **determined to stick by his Christian conscience, whatever the potential cost to his success.**

What happened next has gone down in the annals of sporting legend. Liddell won bronze in the 200m and then broke the 400m world record three times in two days, winning gold. Two quotes from him are, I think, particularly powerful – on the one hand, Liddell testified to his God-given talent and the sense of conviction he had about using this talent: ‘God made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure.’ But on the other, this is what he said shortly after returning from the Olympics: ‘It has been a wonderful experience to compete in the Olympic Games and to bring home a gold medal. But since I have been a young lad, I have had my eyes on a different prize. You see, each one of us is in a greater race than any I have run in Paris, and this race ends when God gives out the medals.’

Liddell retired from athletics the following year, and eventually became a missionary in China. A quite extraordinary life. And it’s easy to enjoy the ‘happy ending,’ as it were – but let’s just take a moment to reflect on the choice at the time. He was heavily criticised in the press, who accused him of being selfish, narrow-minded, dogmatic and petty – in other words, doing that very unBritish thing of taking his faith too seriously! – and also of being unpatriotic (a powerful criticism to make just a few years after the Great War). At one point, a group of reporters, students, and concerned citizens even gathered outside his door in Edinburgh, banging on it and declaring, “He’s a traitor to his country.”

But **Liddell had drawn his line, whatever the cost. His first aim was to glorify his Lord and Saviour.** And the first chapter of the Book of Daniel, which we begin looking at today, is all about the sort of agonising decision Eric Liddell had to take – indeed any person of deep faith and conviction living in their times. Daniel is set in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem and the conquest of God’s chosen people. The story of the bible up to this point has been all about forming a people living under the direction of God. In the purest sense of the term, it’s about creating a theocracy, a totally godly culture, which would act as an example, a *light* to the world.

But as we know, God’s people couldn’t do it – at least not for any length of time and with any consistency. For decades the prophets had been warning them that God would withdraw his special protection if they kept living godless, divided lives – and eventually judgement fell. Nebuchadnezzar’s army marched through the land and conquered Jerusalem. The temple was also destroyed and many of its treasures plundered. This is all summarised briefly in the first two verses of Daniel.

But this is also one of the three biggest turning points in the whole story of scripture. If the much better-known ones are God’s call of Abram near the beginning, and the arrival of Jesus the Messiah (the biggest one of all), **the other great change, at least for God’s people, is the change from a godly mono-culture to exile. From this point, God’s people live as strangers in a strange land.** This quickly became the experience of the early Christians, but it starts several centuries earlier. The idea of living as a ‘set apart’ people, not in their own land but in the nations of the world, really begins *here*.

It means Daniel is really an incredibly important book, certainly now – one of the most useful and practical for any serious followers of their faith. For centuries it was largely overlooked, when the church allied to state power created the idea of Christendom in Europe...

Nearly every baby was baptised into the Christian faith, however nominally; religious observance was enforced on the population and for well over a thousand years we re-created a religious mono-culture. But that has broken down, and now the message of Daniel speaks loud and clear again. It is all about how to live as a serious disciple in the culture around you. What bits do we accept, what bits do we challenge? Where do we take our stand? And most crucially, where is God in all this? That is the million-dollar question, which sits under everything else.

And the answer to the last of those questions, the most important one of them all, is that **God hasn't left his people. God is right there with them, just as he always was.** He is not bound by land and buildings, he is the God of his people, *wherever* they are. Apart from the generic name 'temple of God' (v2), the very first reference to God in the Book of Daniel makes this clear: (v9) 'Now God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel.' This is very instructive. The book begins with no reference to the Lord, which mirrors the feeling among the people, that their ruin meant that God had abandoned them. The writer of Daniel is implicitly recognising this – where is God in all this?

And the answer in verse 9 is wonderfully reassuring: God is right where he always is – with his people, pulling the strings behind the scenes. God's people have to accept a new reality; but God is still God, and is in their exile. People of faith have often sensed the hand of the Lord most powerfully in their times of trial – in the wilderness, in the fire and the flood. And so it is with Daniel – the first and most important thing we learn is this: God is *still* with his people. God is *always* with his people. And he remains *for* his people.

But that doesn't take the challenges away. The second thing we learn – and it's one we'll see again and again in this book – is that **to follow the Lord with integrity usually means we have to draw a line somewhere, and this line involves risk and sacrifice.** God's people are called to put him first, to follow his path first, to 'do things for the Audience of One,' as someone very helpfully put it – and sometimes to do that puts us at odds with the values and behaviours of the culture around us. The word 'holy' means 'set apart' for a reason.

But where do you draw the line? That is the other big question isn't it? It's interesting that Daniel took a Babylonian name, a Babylonian education, and a job in the Babylonian civil service working for a pagan ruler – but he drew *his* line over food. Why did he accept all the other things, but draw the line there? It may seem odd to our ears, but food laws were – and are – an incredibly important part of Jewish faith, and eating the wrong thing would have made Daniel unclean before God in a way that the other things didn't. So, Daniel and his friends chose to make a stand on this issue.

As we reflect on this chapter today, you may be aware of an ethical issue or dilemma where you are feeling prompted to take a stand. It may be different to the Christian sister or brother sitting next to you. But, **let's note the wise and gracious way they took this stand.** They talked to the right person privately rather than stand on a soapbox. They were polite. And they asked for a trial period to prove that they could do the job just as well regardless. If we have to take a costly stand, and risk paying a price for it, let's be sure that price we pay is for the stand itself, and not the way we take our stand. Let's be mocked for our humility and gentleness, not being obnoxious!

The final thing we learn is that **God blesses faithful obedience.** Daniel and his friends' health flourished, and the official could therefore afford to turn a blind eye. I don't know if Daniel's example specifically inspired Eric Liddell, but the outcome was the same: God honoured Liddell's faithfulness, 2,500 years after Daniel and his friends. Our God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. And that remains true for us. I saw numerous examples of this in my workplace, when I felt called to take a stand. If it's dedicated to God, he always comes through – not always in the way we expect, but always – for the sake of his people. The God of Daniel is our Lord, too. He knows our situation, and he is right there with us. May the Lord inspire us afresh to draw the wise line, and above all to trust him, whatever our stand, whatever our situation. May He grant us his favour and compassion, too. Amen.