

"The Comfort of knowing the despised God'. Daniel 5:1-31

The excluded God

You could listen to the radio discussing the Covid situation, watch the TV as it talks about the affairs of nations, open your paper to read about state and federal politics – and God is nowhere.

We focus on, are pre-occupied with the human

History is the battle of human ideas and human powers – only

Truth – the fruit of human discovery, or of human story telling

Religion – that's about faith communities, about collective human believing

The secular west wants a public life and conversation that excludes God

And that means we are always being presented with a distorted view of reality

Are never hearing the true story, the full story, because all we ever get is the human story

And even though here in the church we keep talking about God we can be discouraged by that – by people's refusal to even think of God, or worse, sucked in by that, start to relate to God as if He is just an idea, a human idea, in reality absent and powerless

Today in Daniel 5 you have heard a very human story – of a King, Belshazzar, and the characters at his court – of courtiers and advisers, or a canny queen mother, and of Daniel, a forgotten wise man

Heard the story of the last night of a human empire

But it is also the story of God

A story that gives the true picture

When I use the word story some may think 'made up'

But that is not the case

We all have true stories to tell – stories that matter - of how we may have come to Australia, or how we met our husband or wife

True stories to tell our children –

Daniel 5 gives the true picture because it is a true story.

There was a time when people claimed that was not the case.

Belshazzar, they said, was made up

We've never heard of him in the record, not seen his name on the king lists

But they looked closer – the last King on those lists was Nabonidus. He was away from Babylon for long periods, up to ten years. And they found some clay tablets in an ancient library recoding how he appointed his son, the crown prince, to rule Babylon in his place, and that son was Belshazzar, to whom Nabonidus 'entrusted the kingship'. He was the effective ruler of Babylon

And they have excavated the palace, and in the large throne room there were walls covered in white plaster, plaster on which a message could be written

And Babylon did fall in a night

This true story starts with the despised God and the idolatrous king

The Despised God 5:1-4

Daniel 5: King Belshazzar held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine in their presence.² Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar gave orders to bring in the gold and silver vessels that his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, wives, and concubines could drink from them.³ So they brought in the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, wives, and concubines drank from them.⁴ They drank the wine and praised their gods made of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

This is an impressive party – one thousand guests. It speaks of power, wealth and luxury. And during the party the vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple, the house of God, in Jerusalem [1:2], are brought in to serve as drinking vessels for the king and his guests.

Now what does that action say Belshazzar thinks of the living God?

It tells us he thinks that God doesn't matter, He doesn't need to be considered at all.

Belshazzar thinks He can use God's stuff whenever he wants, however he wants

Use it without regard to God just as if it was his own.

When you use someone's stuff without consulting or considering them – what does that say you think of them

If you walked by and took someone's lunch and eat it in front of them

Or grabbed their car keys and drove off, and then parked their car wherever you wanted

That would communicate loud and clear that you despise them, that you don't fear them, that they are so much less than you – less powerful, less important – that you don't have to worry about what they think at all

Belshazzar is confident of his own power, and he uses these vessels v. 4, to praise what he considers the source of his power and wealth – his gods

gods made of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

Belshazzar is saying the God of the Jews is less than these lifeless idols, powerless compared to them, unimportant.

That really is contempt, isn't it, when you use what is God's to do the very thing He forbids, He hates – to worship lifeless idols, to proclaim they are greater than God

God is the despised God at Belshazzar's court

But it is not much different today

We use what is God's to do the very thing He hates

The tongues He has given us to lie, even lie about Him

The bodies he has given us for sexual immorality

The wealth He gives to bolster our pride and put our trust in money

Sometimes we even use His word to defy Him, whether it is twisting it to justify the abuse of wives in marriage, or to enlist support for a political agenda

We are not much different

And Jesus' generation wasn't much different

When He came amongst us – God with us was the despised God, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, determinedly got rid of and held up to public shame on the cross

But God is not just an idea

He is not controlled by our thoughts about Him

People thinking and acting as if He is nothing doesn't stop Him from being who He is

And HE is the living God, the God who can act in the world – without us

Belshazzar's revelry is disturbed

The Living God 5:5-12

Daniel 5:⁵ At that moment the fingers of a man's hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the king's palace wall next to the lampstand. As the king watched the hand that was writing,⁶ his face turned pale, and his thoughts so terrified him that he soiled himself and his knees knocked together.

God crashes Belshazzar's party

He comes, uninvited, and uncontrolled by Belshazzar

And God's action brings terror as one who is so used to being in charge recognises a power not accountable to him.

It's worth remembering

The living God does what He wills

As Nebuchednezzar had said

"There is no one who can block his hand or say to him, 'What have you done.'"

We want to live as if our world is closed, that God cannot be present or operate in it – or at least not without our permission

But that is fantasy land

As the Psalmist says

Psalm 135: ⁶ The LORD does whatever he pleases
in heaven and on earth,
in the seas and all the depths.

This is His world

He can bring a people out of Egypt, bring famine or flood, can save or destroy

He can, unbidden, enter our world, the creator, as a man – the Word become flesh, the Lord Jesus

The king is unsettled and so shouts for the *mediums, Chaldeans, and diviners*

⁷ *The king shouted to bring in the mediums, Chaldeans, and diviners. He said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this inscription and gives me its interpretation will be clothed in purple, have a gold chain around his neck, and have the third highest position in the kingdom."* ⁸ *So all the king's wise men came in, but none could read the inscription or make its interpretation known to him.* ⁹ *Then King Belshazzar became even more terrified, his face turned pale, and his nobles were bewildered.*

These are the experts in the uncanny, in communication from the unseen world, in giving meaning to events

Belshazzar offers them a rich, an extravagant, reward for telling him what the writing on the wall means

Knowledge is power. Belshazzar is attempting to regain control. These are his men, who owe their security and prosperity to him. He is the one who can enrich them, their patron, the one they need to serve.

But sadly for him his experts once again prove useless.

Not knowing the true God, for all their learning they cannot discern His intent.

Unable to regain control Belshazzar's terror increases

But then a figure from a bygone era comes to his aid – the queen As his wives are already at the feast this is the Queen mother, who can remember what Belshazzar has chosen to forget

¹⁰ *Because of the outcry of the king and his nobles, the queen came to the banquet hall. "May the king live forever," she said. "Don't let your thoughts terrify you or your face be pale.* ¹¹ *There is a man in your kingdom who has a spirit of the holy gods in him. In the days of your predecessor he was found to have insight, intelligence, and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods. Your predecessor, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, mediums, Chaldeans, and diviners. Your own predecessor, the king,* ¹² *did this because Daniel, the one the king named Belteshazzar, was found to have an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and intelligence, and the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems. Therefore, summon Daniel, and he will give the interpretation."*

No need to panic. We've been here before, and I know the man you need

Nebuchednezzar, your predecessor, the great king, recognised him as chief of the magicians– for he, Daniel, had v. 12 an *extraordinary spirit, knowledge and intelligence, and the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems. Therefore, summon Daniel,*

And you can almost hear her say – why haven't you summoned him yet

So Daniel is summoned, brought out of obscurity, recalled to service

The Speaking God 5:13-28

Daniel 5: ¹³ Then Daniel was brought before the king. The king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the Judean exiles that my predecessor the king brought from Judah?" ¹⁴ I've heard that you have a spirit of the gods in you, and that insight, intelligence, and extraordinary wisdom are found in you. ¹⁵ Now the wise men and mediums were brought before me to read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not give its interpretation. ¹⁶ However, I have heard about you that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Therefore, if you can read this inscription and give me its interpretation, you will be clothed in purple, have a gold chain around your neck, and have the third highest position in the kingdom."

Belshazzar's contempt for the God of the Jews can be heard in his address to Daniel, one of His people.

"Are you Daniel, one of the Judean exiles that my predecessor the king brought from Judah?"

We're back in chapter 1.

Daniel is the outsider, the humbled captive – whose God could not protect them

A man of uncertain ability

'I've heard' ... 'If you can'

But though he is disdainful of Daniel he offers him reward

Belshazzar still believes he is in control, and he has the power – power to enlist to his cause, power to enrich

Daniel's response is blunt.

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts and give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription for the king and make the interpretation known to him."

He does not want or seek the king's favour or rewards

But like the prophets of Israel he will speak the word of God to Belshazzar, make known God's will

Daniel, the prophet, reveals that the living God is not a dumb God. He is the speaking God who expects people to listen.

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts and give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription for the king and make the interpretation known to him. ¹⁸ Your Majesty, the Most High God gave sovereignty, greatness, glory, and majesty to your predecessor Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ Because of the greatness he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages were terrified and fearful of him. He killed anyone he wanted and kept alive anyone he wanted; he exalted anyone he wanted and humbled anyone he wanted. ²⁰ But when his heart was exalted and his spirit became arrogant, he was deposed from his royal throne and his glory was taken from him. ²¹ He was driven away from people, his mind was like an animal's, he lived with the wild donkeys, he was fed grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with dew from the sky until he acknowledged that the Most High God is ruler over human kingdoms and sets anyone he wants over them.

Remember Nebuchadnezzar he says v. 18? Your predecessor, the greatest king of Babylon

He was truly great - ¹⁹ Because of the greatness he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages were terrified and fearful of him. He killed anyone he wanted and kept alive anyone he wanted; he exalted anyone he wanted and humbled anyone he wanted

That greatness came from the Most High God, and remember how Nebuchadnezzar was brought to confess that, brought to repent of His pride

²¹ He was driven away from people, his mind was like an animal's, he lived with the wild donkeys, he was fed grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with dew from the sky until he acknowledged that the Most High God is ruler over human kingdoms and sets anyone he wants over them.

Here is the problem

²² "But you his successor, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this. ²³ Instead, you have exalted yourself against the Lord of the heavens. The vessels from his house were brought to you, and as you and your nobles, wives, and concubines drank wine from them, you praised the gods made of silver and gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or understand. But you have not glorified the God who holds your life-breath in his hand and who controls the whole course of your life.

You knew.

You knew Nebuchadnezzar's experience

Daniel 4: ³⁴ But at the end of those days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, looked up to heaven, and my sanity returned to me. Then I praised the Most High and honored and glorified him who lives forever:

*For his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom is from generation to generation.*

³⁵ *All the inhabitants of the earth are counted as nothing,
and he does what he wants with the army of heaven
and the inhabitants of the earth.*

*There is no one who can block his hand
or say to him, "What have you done?"*

Knew his testimony, what God, with great patience, had brought Nebuchadnezzar to confess

That the Most High God's "dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation"

Rules not just in Nebuchadnezzar's time – but your time Belshazzar, and in every age

And you had heard from him that "all the inhabitants of the earth are counted as nothing, and God does what he wants with the army of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. There is no one who can block his hand or say to him "What have you done?" Daniel 4:34-35

He is in charge of you – He can do what He wants with you

You had heard the truth. Knew it – and did nothing

You did not humble yourself to confess the truth of the living God, to v. 22 glorify *the God who holds your life-breath in his hand and who controls the whole course of your life.*

Instead you did the opposite - you defied and despised Him, treated Him as less than your idols

So now the God who has spoken in Nebuchadnezzar's dreams and their interpretation, spoken to you Belshazzar in Nebuchadnezzar's words

Has spoken again

²⁴ *Therefore, he sent the hand, and this writing was inscribed.*

And Daniel proceeds to interpret these three words for weights on the wall, to give God's meaning in this sign, by a play on words, bringing out the significance of the verbal root

²⁵ *"This is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN.* ²⁶ *This is the interpretation of the message:*

'Mene' means that God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end.

²⁷ *'Tekel' means that you have been weighed on the balance and found deficient.*

²⁸ *'Peres' means that your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians."*

Numbered, Weighed, Divided

Not listening to a word that would have given him mercy, Belshazzar hears a word that brings judgment

Not humbling himself in life, he will be humbled in death

The living, speaking God expects to be listened to

To be listened to as He speaks through His human messengers

Where He has given His word He doesn't need to repeat the experience of the one He gave the word to in the lives of others. He doesn't need to repeat Nebuchadnezzar's experience in Belshazzar's life

The living, speaking God expects to be listened to as He speaks through His human messengers

True today – it is perilous to know and ignore. To hear and do the very opposite – is to invite destruction

Our Lord warned of that in the story of the two builders. The foolish builder, who lost everything, was the person who heard and didn't act on what he has heard.

Matt. 7:²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn't act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. It collapsed with a great crash."

And the gospel reminds us that to hear and believe is life, but to hear and fail to believe, to reject – is to continue under God's wrath

John 3:³⁶ The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him. ³⁶ The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him.

Perilous to know and not act, for the God who speaks is the almighty God, the God who can fulfill His word, who keeps His promises and carries out His judgments

The Almighty God 5:25-30

Daniel 5:²⁹ Then Belshazzar gave an order, and they clothed Daniel in purple, placed a gold chain around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

Unlike the men of Nineveh who heard Jonah say "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed" and who repented and were spared,

Belshazzar does not repent

Bestowing the unwanted reward on Daniel shows he is determined not to humble himself before the word of God. He will be king to the end

And God's word is fulfilled

³⁰ That very night Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans was killed, ³¹ and Darius the Mede received the kingdom at the age of sixty-two.

The judgment spoken was certain, for the living, speaking God is the almighty God.

Not one word He speaks will fail

The end He decreed not just for Belshazzar but for the Babylonian empire – is fulfilled

v. 30 is not just the fulfillment of the word written on the wall

But of the words God spoke through Isaiah [13, 46-47] and Jeremiah [29, 50, 51] of Babylon's fall

And this fulfillment comes about – not through an act of an individual

But the movement of nations, the rise and fall of empires

The despised God, the God our society excludes

Is the Living, Speaking, Almighty God

The eternal King

Who can humble all the proud

We are shown that here

And we see it clearly in the gospel

The Lord Jesus, God with us, was consigned by the powerful and proud to oblivion, to be shamed, killed and forgotten

Despised

But in His death and resurrection

The victory of the proud is turned into their defeat

Their wisdom shown to be folly – they crucified the Lord of glory

Their power, the power of death – unable to shackle the life of God

He is exalted as Lord, known throughout the world, and one day every knee will bow to Him

Our God is living, almighty, He speaks, and keeps His word

The God who expects us to learn from the Word He gives to others

As we hear Daniel speak to Belshazzar it is clear – the living God expects us to learn from the Word that He gives to others

‘you knew all this’ Daniel said to Belshazzar, and knowing this he should have acted on it

He didn’t have to have Nebuchadnezzar’s experience himself to respond to the truth those experiences revealed

We don’t have to have the apostles’ experience of Jesus to respond to the truth that experience revealed

We have their witness, the word of truth, and we must act on it – or be judged by it.

Jesus said

John 12:⁴⁷ If anyone hears my words and doesn’t keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸ The one who rejects me and doesn’t receive my sayings has this as his judge: The word I have spoken will judge him on the last day. ⁴⁹ For I have not spoken on my own, but the Father himself who sent me has given me a command to say everything I have said. ⁵⁰ I know that his command is eternal life. So the things that I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me.”

We have heard the word Jesus spoke.

Whether that is from our parents, or reading a bible, or sitting here

He is speaking to us, however we have heard it

And the response that word calls for is still the same

To humble our hearts, our wills, before God – by repenting and believing the word Jesus speaks

Repenting by Saying we are not God

We don't give ourselves life

Every good thing we have comes from Him

We owe Him thanks and praise, trust and obedience

And We are wrong where we do not glorify Him

And We are not in charge – God's King Jesus is

We have heard the word that will either give us life or judge us on the last day, and unlike Belshazzar – we can still respond

God calls us to respond, for Jesus did not come to condemn, but to save.

His command is eternal life

God expects us to learn from the word He gives us through others

So don't be like Belshazzar – knowing but not acting, defying God, determined to cling to what he most certainly would lose, to keep on being the ruler at the cost of his life,

Turn to the Lord Jesus and call on Him for mercy. Hear, and act

The God we can trust in a world that excludes Him

And we see in Daniel 5 that there is great comfort in humbling ourselves and believing, in trusting the word of the excluded, despised God

Think of those Israelites who first heard Daniel

Suffering under a succession of rulers and empires

And their God, the LORD of heaven and earth – disregarded and dismissed, seemingly absent

And then here the veil is drawn back and in the prophetic word they see God at work in a moment of history, see the work He is always doing

Mene – Numbered – they see history is not ruled by chance. God has ordained times and seasons, He has a plan

Tekel – Weighed – He continues to be the just judge of all the earth, always at work in righteousness and justice

Parsin – Divided – and in all this He is working out His plan to save His people, for this judgement brought Cyrus, emperor of the medes and persians to power, Cyrus declared by God in Isaiah 45 to be the one who would bring his people back from exile

In the word they see the world truly, the place of God's saving purpose and plan

The world He is not excluded from but within which He acts as its sovereign creator and ruler.

Such encouragement in that glimpse of the work of the excluded God, encouragement to not embrace the collective blindness that wants to pretend He is not here

Encouragement for them, and for us

And we have more encouragement

We may not have prophetic insight into why this or that happened in the world

Why Trump was defeated and Biden came to power

Or Why Xi Jinping is ascendant

But we have the encouragement of another prophetic word that draws the veil back on God's work in history, on His working out His purpose in the world

Revelation, that reveals that the Lamb who has been slain sits on the throne, and He rules

And what do we see as He takes the scroll and opens the seals

Numbered – history unfolds according to His plan and His timing. It is not chance.

Weighed – in what unfolds He continues to enact His just judgments in history, his judgments on idolatry and violence, on greed and sexual immorality Rev. 9:20-21,

Revelation 9: ²⁰The rest of the people, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands to stop worshiping demons and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood, which cannot see, hear, or walk. ²¹And they did not repent of their murders, their sorceries, their sexual immorality, or their thefts.

and the inhabitants of heaven, those who see, praise His justice

Revelation 16: ⁵I heard the angel of the waters say,

*You are just,
the Holy One, who is and who was,
because you have passed judgment on these things.*

⁷I heard the altar say,

*Yes, Lord God, the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments.*

Divided – in all these judgments He is working salvation for His people, bringing the time when the Son is revealed in glory and His people, His bride, rejoice forever in His presence

There is great comfort in knowing the despised God in His prophetic word

In knowing He is the God we can trust in a world that excluded Him

Trust to be working out His good, just and saving purposes – even when we cannot see them

Comfort in knowing Him in His word as He is – the living, speaking, almighty God

The merciful God who still speaks to us now in the world that excludes Him the word that will bring life, the word of His Son Jesus

As those who have heard that word

Be encouraged and live in the light of the reality He reveals in His prophetic word

Trusting Jesus, the exalted Son, who rules over all history – for all we need

Obeying Jesus – in all He says

Proclaiming Jesus – speaking the truth of His rule in a world that needs to humble itself to find life