

A bonfire night plot: Daniel 3.1-18

Today's TFTD come from Rod Hill:

The stories of Daniel 1 – 6 are set in the sixth century BCE and, whether historically accurate, or not, the book of Daniel tells a cracking story. Few figures of the Old Testament are as familiar to us as Daniel. Daniel, we are told, was a man who was uprooted from his home, educated in an alien society and yet kept an unswerving loyalty to the God of his people – shades of Ruth here, who we read about earlier in the year?

And what a passage to choose for November 5th – the fiery furnace and the evil plot!

King Nebuchadnezzar built an enormous golden image and set in the plains of Dura, from where it could probably be seen glinting in the sun for miles around. What a display! So, the officials set up a great feast of dedication and proclaimed that anyone who did not worship the golden image was to be thrown into the fiery furnace. So, the music is played, and the people dance to the tune of the pipe and fall down in worship to the golden image. But it's all a trap set by the astrologers and court officials, who know that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, whom the king has set over the affairs of province of Babylon, will do no such thing.

“Ahah!”, says the king, “So, it's true that you will not fall down and worship the golden image that I have had set up! So, if you won't fall down and worship the image, you shall be thrown into the pit of burning fire!”

“We don't need to defend ourselves”, say the three, “even if we are thrown into the fiery furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us. And if not, we still won't bow down and worship the golden image”.

Now that's faith, isn't it? I wonder if I would have the courage to stand up to that sort of intimidation and stand the ground for my faith. I hope so, but ...

Anyway, to cut to the chase, the three men were thrown, tied and bound, into the fiery furnace – end of story. But, 'No'! The king comes to look into the fiery furnace, no doubt expecting to see nothing, only to find *four* men there – and thought one looks like a son of the Gods. The seemingly groundless faith of the three had been vindicated.

The king calls Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to come out of the fiery furnace, which they do, totally unharmed. The king praised the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his Angel to rescue his servants and instantly, it seems, converts to their religion. The chapter ends with our three heroes promoted

to one of the highest offices in the province of Babylon.

Fascinating, dramatic, inspiring story, isn't it? A lovely fairy-tale ending. What more is there to say?

- Well, how about, what happened to the fourth man, the one who “looks like a son of the gods”? who is he and where does he go to? Nebuchadnezzar's words **like a son of the gods** don't give any indication of how this recognition was made, or what it meant. How was such an identification carried out? Is this some kind of equivalent to the Hebrew term that we know well from other writings ‘son(s) of god(s)’? It does seem that what Nebuchadnezzar saw he described in terms of a member of the heavenly court (see, for example, Job 1:6)
- Our three heroes are seen as ‘servants of the most high God’. But, even as he confessed faith in the Hebrew God (apparently) he remained a polytheist – no other god can save in this way – so there are, still, other Gods.
- God's protection over the three Hebrews extends to every last hair on their head, every last thread of their clothes. This is a god, among many, who has absolute power and control over natural forces.

My head is beginning to hurt. Such a simple, straightforward and lovely story suddenly has all these deep questions and complexities around it.

Well, that's how life is, is it not? There are all sorts of twists and turns, unexpected complexities, puzzles for us to dwell on, things that we don't understand. And following the carpenter of Nazareth doesn't change any of that, or take it away. Being a Christian isn't a matter of a one- off change and all is well. It's a journey, is it not? It's an encounter. It's a love story. It's all of those things, and more besides.

But, in the depths of the fiery furnace,
Nebuchadnezzar saw the signs of a ‘son of
God’. In Shadrach Meshach and Abednego's
faithful commitment to God, he caught a glimpse
of something.

I hope that people will say that of me – in my life and in my ministry, people caught a glimpse of something deeper – of the God who was with him in all of life's twists and turns. How about you?

At the beginning of each year in theological college the new students would ‘sign the roll’ and as they did so the continuing students sang this hymn, one of my firm

favourites:

Behold the servant of the Lord!

I wait Thy guiding eye to feel,
To hear and keep Thy every word,
To prove and do Thy perfect will,
Joyful from my own works to cease,
Glad to fulfil all righteousness.

Me if Thy grace vouchsafe to use,
Meanest of all Thy creatures, me,
The deed, the time, the manner choose,
Let all my fruit be found of Thee;
Let all my works in Thee be wrought,
By Thee to full perfection brought.

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