

## 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024 – Daniel 2 ‘The Revealer of mysteries’

I wonder if you’ve ever had a significant dream? I don’t mean the sort of dream we all get, which takes random bits of our lives and jumbles them all up. Or the sort of recurring dreams which do have some sort of symbolic meaning about our personality or life experience: I often dream about running somewhere and never being able to catch up, which I’m told is the sign of someone who tends to be self-critical – which is true. I mean the kind of vivid, unusual, maybe unique dream, which you’re sure is trying to tell you something.

I’ve read many testimonies in the last few years of people coming to Christ via dreams – especially in countries where the state religion is opposed to the public expression of Christian faith. For example, here is Dee’s testimony which I read in a recent Christianity magazine: “During this time, I began to have supernatural dreams. In one dream, a piece of scripture was following me around. Later, Jesus appeared to me twice. On one occasion he was wearing bright blue royal robes. His presence was overwhelming, but not in a negative way. I could never see his face, because it was so bright, but I knew it was Jesus. And I felt light, comforted and peaceful.” Dee had been meeting a Christian friend who had been praying for her – but it was this encounter that made her stop and think – shortly afterwards, she came to Christ.

In today’s story, Nebuchadnezzar is also on a spiritual journey – although he doesn’t quite realise it yet, that becomes much clearer in chapter 4... This journey is very important, because King Nebuchadnezzar is the most powerful man in the world at the time, and this journey is, like Dee, similarly stimulated by a significant dream: ‘In the second year of his reign,’ ch2 begins, ‘Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep.’

There are at least 20 recorded dreams in the bible. All of them are meaningful, and generally we can observe that they usually either get people into trouble or out of trouble. Both Josephs i.e. in the Old Testament and the New Testament, are the most famous receivers and/or interpreters of dreams. Joseph in Genesis is a particularly good example, as he both received and interpreted dreams, and his early dreams got him *into* trouble with his brothers, and his later interpretations got him *out of* trouble, released from prison and into Pharaoh’s good books.

And, just as it was the ruler, Pharaoh, who received a significant dream in Genesis, so now, it is King Nebuchadnezzar whose sleep is disturbed. Why might God speak through a dream? I think we can say that God tends to use dreams, if all natural methods of revealing himself are closed off. Hence the dreams which are leading many to Christ in parts of the world where the gospel is banned. And, in *this* story, this is the most powerful man in the world at the time, full of his own hubris and surrounded by vast layers of sycophantic advisers, who would never let anything ‘off-message’ anywhere near him.

**But God is not bound by our human limitations; he speaks to the king in the one way that will cut through, direct to his spirit.** In a culture that assumed that the gods communicated in mysterious ways, a dream could reach the depths of his soul in a way nothing and no-one else could reach.

However, unlike Pharaoh 600 years previously, who dealt civilly with his magicians and sages trying to decipher the dream, the Babylonian king, well-known in history as one of the most brilliant and most brutal military leaders the world has ever seen, is rather more intimidating. In typical fashion he tries to bully his way to wisdom, saying in effect to his Magi (name sound familiar?): ‘Tell me what it means or I’ll kill you.’ Now I’m not sure that kind of pep talk ever really works... about as effective as a sign I keep in my room, which always makes me chuckle: ‘Floggings will continue until morale improves.’

It does, at least, prompt Daniel to decisive action. Again, as we observed last week, **Daniel doesn't just do the right thing, he does it in the right way.** He speaks to Arioch with wisdom and tact (not in our text), and buys a bit of time. Remember that Arioch is probably extremely unwilling to carry out the king's orders, not least because every time he does this kind of thing, it reminds him that he will likely be next, and someone will do it to him. So, he gives Daniel a night to find an answer – and of course, God gives him an answer.

There's so much we could say about what happens next – but today let's observe the following:

**First, if you need help, get people to pray with you. Corporate prayer has an exponential effect.**

Four people praying (as in this story) is not so much  $1+1+1+1 = 4$  – but  $4 \times 4$ . This is why we pray in our services, and also why we have a prayer chain for urgent needs. Jesus tells us that if two people agree about anything they ask for on earth, it will be done by the Father in heaven. There's a mystery to why prayer isn't always answered as we expect, but the biblical record is consistent in encouraging followers of the Lord to pray *together* for things – just like Daniel and his friends do here. Holding your important prayer needs to yourself is really a subtle form of pride, because it rests on the assumption that you don't need the support of others around you, you can deal with it all yourself. Jesus comes to redeem a community of people, not just a lot of individuals. If you've got a big challenge, share it with a few others to pray for you. It's how it's meant to be.

**Second, if God answers your prayer make sure that God gets the glory.** I'm always surprised how easy it is for us to forget to be thankful to God – it's a human tendency to give ourselves credit or even to use God for our advantage. Daniel quite rightly praised God when he got the revelation of the dream, but the real test came the next day in the presence of the king. He could have done what many of us would have done and just given the explanation, and allowed himself to get the credit. It took real courage and integrity to point the king to God. If God has given you an answer to prayer, this story reminds us to make sure to tell it!

**Finally, God is at work in history.** Remember, this is a pagan ruler whose life is about to get turned on its head – more on that in chapter 4. But the dream in this story is very clear that God is at work in the big story of our world. Our text didn't tell the whole of the dream, but it describes a statue of different materials, which represent four different dynasties: first the Babylonians, then, depending on your interpretation, the Medes, Persians and Greeks, or the Medo-Persians, Greeks and Romans. Either way, it's what happens next that matters: a stone cut without hands will destroy the statue and fill the earth. This stone, Daniel tells the king, is the coming kingdom of God.

And, looking back, we can see the outworking of the dream. It's significant that both St Peter and St Paul describe Jesus as the cornerstone – we might take the vision of Daniel and say the 'corner-stone cut without hands' – who overcomes earthly power and reigns for ever and ever. Ironically, the magi at the start of the chapter unwittingly prophesy about this kingdom when they plead with the king: (v11) 'No-one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans.' **Except we know that one God – the God of heaven as Daniel calls him – did.**

And, even more amazingly, it was magi 600 years later who were among the first to spot it. A God who came to live among us, whose arrival undermined earthly power so much it repeatedly tried to get rid of him. A God of gods and Lord of kings, revealer not just of mysteries but of the human heart. The rock cut without hands, who revealed his identity on the rock of Caesarea Philippi, who promised to build his church on the disciple he renamed 'rock', who died on the rock called the Skull and whose moving of the rock which sealed his tomb declared his resurrection. This is our God – and Daniel got a glimpse. But we see the whole. We offer our present challenges and our future hope into the hands of this God. As Daniel cried out: Praise be to the name of our God for ever and ever! Amen.