SHABBAT SERMON

Jonathan Magonet

I have had great difficulty preparing the texts of Daniel for this Bible Week. Last year, despite the challenge of working with Aramaic, it was possible to identify with the experiences of Daniel and his companions. Spiritual descendants of the patriarch Joseph, they were learning how to survive within the complex regulations and nuances of life in the court of the ruler of the Babylonian empire. Under Daniel's guidance they came to understand how to retain their identity and relative freedom despite the many obstacles, even life-threatening ones, placed in their path. In this regard, Daniel himself stands out as a courageous leader, a skilled diplomat, able to negotiate the treacherous waters of the rivalries and jealousies of court life, while maintaining his special relationship with successive rulers.

But the Daniel presented to the reader of the second half of the book, is older, more detached, wearier, less resilient. Not so much an actor as someone who is acted upon. Visions and dreams came to him filled with messages, but even his well-documented skills as an interpreter seem to have failed him.

These visions and dreams are a strange collection. Some purport to relate future history, giving enough material for scholars today to try to pin down the events, and the identities of those who participated. Yet, at the same time, readers have to struggle with the author's attempts to conceal the actors involved, providing just enough information to make them vaguely recognizable. I wonder how such puzzling material was accepted by contemporaries of the composer of Daniel's book. Did they believe them to be true visions that came to the historic Daniel, showing him details of a distant future? Or did they also, as today, recognize them as a fictional prophetic vision written with the hindsight of later historical records and contemporary experience? Presumably the 'truth' of the account must have been accepted for the collection to have found its way into the Hebrew Bible. So what were the circumstances that made such a strange and questionable reading of the future acceptable, even desirable?

What is particularly disturbing is the story told in the visions of a world where horrific monsters emerge from the tempestuous sea and successively fight one another. But then they morph into enormous military armies hacking their enemies to death for centuries, in a playground that encompasses most of the known world. The lives of their leaders seem to be dominated by sibling rivalries and jealousies. They are all nurtured by the poisonous legacy they received as spiritual offspring of their all-powerful, all-conquering mentor Alexander the Great. The Daniel who lived at the centre of power of one such an empire, is offered the chance of witnessing later centuries of this political turmoil and bloodshed, with the making and remaking of borders and alliances,

the creation and destruction of countless societies and even nations. All this Daniel sees from the security of his dreams or waking visions.

It has taken me a while to understand why this part of the Book of Daniel seems so radically different from the other books of the Hebrew Bible. It expresses the feelings of a people who have fallen out of history. From the beginning of the stories of Abraham, through the slavery in Egypt, the conquest of the land of Canaan and the centuries of single or divided nationhood, the Jewish people with their God, are at the centre of their world and of human history. From this perspective the fate of the entire world is bound up in the destiny of their nation, under the rule of their God. The nations around may be part of their extended family, or sometimes good, sometimes bad neighbours. Together or apart they must cope with threatening distant empires, invaders from the 'land of the south' or the 'land of the north'. For Israel these enemies are important only because they impinge on Israel's existence and from time-to-time impact on Israel's destiny. If Israel acts wrongly in the eyes of God, they can become God's weapons to chastise the nation. If Israel does well, they may become partners in trade, or a necessary part of a military alliance or merely tiresome sources of border disputes. But, with the occasional exceptions of politically successful kings or visionary prophets, the other nations are considered significant only insofar as they are relevant to Isrrael's own ethnocentric existence. Israel's history is the only 'true' history, that is, history determined by God.

But after the Babylonian and subsequent conquests of their land, the Jewish people in our many exiles are merely bystanders to the real events of history. Perhaps for a while we have some territory of our own, but otherwise as a minority in the domain of others we have to be self-sufficient, occasionally manifesting as culturally separate from the surrounding people, but collectively utterly insignificant. Perhaps in some local instances, as God has promised, we may become a blessing to the families of the earth; maybe from time to time we spread a little light to the nations or witness successfully to the existence of our God. But real power in the world, the forces that drive and change society, the values and creativity of human beings, lie elsewhere. It is only when our land is attacked and occupied, our worship disturbed, our families put at risk, or we become the victims of a power-hungry foreigner like Antiochus, that we step out of the shadows for a while and act upon our small world stage. But the real powers are elsewhere. And perhaps that is why Daniel's vision of the white-haired Ancient of Days, the God who created and judges the entire world, and the anointed one who will rule for an eternity, are no more than transient figures in a dream, a fanciful vision, a vague hope for some possible future.

A large amount of space in the visions is devoted to the most hated and dangerous enemy, the one unnamed but identified as Antiochus. He is the one who is criticised for his consistent attack on Israel's faith, who interrupted the daily Temple sacrifices, who placed an abomination in the very holy of holies. He has usurped our centrality in history, and we view this with horror, and perhaps with a disturbing degree of envy.

We do have a promise of a restoration, a period of time offered by the prophet Jeremiah. But therein lies a deeper irony, because in his lifetime Jeremiah was denounced, despised, hounded, imprisoned and almost executed for warning about the forthcoming destruction to come to the Temple itself. With what desperation, in Daniel's world, we play mathematical games with the numbers he foretold, and we have been playing with them ever since. And if a lifetime is not enough for our world to be restored, then hope is offered that even after death something might become possible.

So, how are we to read Daniel? Through the visions that haunt him or his own words that he has left us? The prayer that he recites in Chapter nine is closer in language and form to earlier Biblical

writings. It has about it the kind of care and precision that one might expect from a man like Daniel, schooled in the disciplines of the civil service of a major empire. With precision he lays out and acknowledges the failures and sins of Israel. That they did not listen to the warning of their prophets, nor obeyed the words of the Torah. But God too has qualities of both justice and compassion that we can rely on. Moreover, here we return to the crucial issue of the place of Israel within the world as God's chosen people. God brought us out of Egypt and thereby created a reputation that is God's crowning glory, so surely it is in God's interest to restore us to our rightful place.

Daniel concludes with two sentences that each begin with *'v'attah'*, 'and now' (Daniel 9:15, 17). They are the standard way of ending a formal negotiation. The first introduces a summary of all that has been discussed, the second points to future actions and consequences. The dreams and visions and fantasies are now put aside and pragmatic reality intercedes. Some of these closing words have found their way into the prayer book of the Jewish people.

'And now, our God, listen to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, and make Your face shine with favour on Your sanctuary that is desolate' He continues in this same formal way: 'O my God incline Your ear and hear, open Your eyes and see our desolations and the city on which Your name is called, for we do not put our supplications before You because of our righteousness but because of Your great compassion.' But then he breaks out of the formality and protocol that has been his lifetime's way of addressing the emperors he has served and the God he has worshipped.

'Adonai sh'ma'a', 'Lord hear!', *'Adonai s'lachah'* 'Lord forgive!', *'Adonai hakshivah v'aseh'*, 'Lord attend and act!'

Gefördert durch:

Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS

Bistum Osnabrück

aufgrund eines Beschlusses des Deutschen Bundestages