

Daniel 3:1,8-30

Today is the First Sunday in Advent. As we light an Advent candle every week, we will think of hope, peace, joy and love that Jesus brings into the world. We need to be reminded of them as we are often surrounded by a world which lacks them. As Spill the Beans wrote poignantly: ‘Light is not so big a deal if we have no experience of darkness; hope is life-giving and transforming because it replaces despair; peace is what we long for when the experience of warfare, terror or personal struggle drains life of what it is meant to contain; joy feels so good because we know how much of a struggle it is when it is not present or when other things in life make it elusive; and the experience of love feels so good and right because when it is absent it feels like a huge hole exists in our very being.’¹

Because of that contrast between what God offers and what we see and experience in the world, we begin our Advent journey with a story of contrasts. We meet three refugees in Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The extent of their plight is already highlighted by the fact that we know them by their new names – names given to them by their oppressor. Their original Hebrew names are full of references to their God: Hananiah means “God is gracious”, Mishael means “Who is like God?” and Azariah translates “God keeps him”. Their new names worship Babylonian gods: Shadrach means "Command of Aku (the moon god)", Meshach means "Who is as Aku is?", and Abednego is "Servant of the god Nebo/Nabu". The very fact of the names of those refugees having been changed is a violation of their God-given identity.

At this stage I think of Paddington Bear whose proper name was a mighty roar but as the family were unable to pronounce it, he was called Paddington instead. If memory serves me right, it was one of the children who made the effort to learn the bear language and Paddington’s proper name in particular. What a wonderful way to affirm someone by recognising their true identity.

The violation of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego goes further when they’re reported as not worshipping King Nebuchadnezzar’s gold idol. They’re immediately brought before the king and made to choose between change of religion, the very core of who they are, and death. They choose death and they do it in style. Probably the most important part of the whole story is their response to that challenge: ‘If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. **But even if he does not**, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.’ But even if he does not...

Again we are reminded that we do not worship God for any blessings or benefits we might get from him. We do not worship God in order to escape the darkness, violence, fear, illness or death that are part of our earthly life. We worship God because he is worthy of worship regardless of the ups and downs of our lives. He is our strength in the midst of turmoil of life and not because he removes it. In a way this story would have

¹ Spill the Beans, issue 25, p. 10.

been equally powerful had they perished in the blazing furnace. We would remember them as martyrs of faith but the lesson would be the same.

As it is, they are rescued. Because God sometimes does rescue us. There is no set pattern – ‘God always’ or ‘God never’. ‘Sometimes’ is more truthful and accurate.

‘the God we serve is able to deliver us (...). But even if he does not...’ Hope, peace, joy and love are all the qualities that we are granted by our merciful God in the midst of the hardship of life. The flicker of the Advent candle today reminds us of the glimmer of hope but also of the not yet of the world around us. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.