

Our Faithfulness to God as Citizens in Society

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[0 : 00] We're thinking about our faithfulness to God as citizens in society. What does that mean? What does it look like?

As followers of Jesus individually and collectively as the church, we are called to shape society. That's our prayer every time we pray, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We're called not just to pray it, but to live it.

To shape the society in which we live. And yet, the danger, perhaps the tragedy, is that it's the other way around.

That society shapes the church. The evangelist Thomas Wow said, Instead of the church evangelising the world, the world has had considerable success in secularising the church.

[1 : 13] It only takes a sweeping glance at history to see the tension between these two possibilities, quite strikingly.

On the one hand, there have been times throughout the history of the church where the church has been complicit with slavery, where the church has been complicit with unjust systems of power and unethical investment of money, such that it has played a part unwittingly, perhaps at times, quite consciously at times, perhaps, but of playing its part in simply making the rich richer and the poor poorer.

There have been times in the history of the church, and right now seems to be one of them, where the church fails to champion the integrity of biblical orthodoxy when it comes to sexual ethics, marriage and relationships.

And instead of being a voice of challenge, the church absorbs the values of the world in which we live. On the other hand, there are those times when the church has dared to challenge its surrounding culture.

I'm thinking of Wilberforce and the Clapham sect, who dared to stand against slavery. I'm thinking of Martin Luther King, who dared to challenge all that went on around him.

[2 : 50] to challenge inequality and oppression. I'm thinking of those times when the church has played the leading role in establishing hospitals, education systems, schools, hospices, and setting up food banks.

The list goes on and on and on. But we must always, always be mindful of the importance of that challenge. That our calling as Christians is not to be shaped by the culture around us, but to shape it.

And today, we're going to think about what we can learn from the person of Daniel as we go back in time to 605 BC.

Jerusalem was besieged. It was defeated by Babylon. The temple was ransacked and articles of worship were taken off and put in places of worship where idols were worshipped.

If we want to begin to get our minds and our hearts around what that must have felt like for God's people, imagine that someone just to overhaul this place of worship now and to take things such as the communion table, perhaps the cross that is up there, to take the Bible, to take the instruments that we use to worship God, to take the things that we associate with worship and with God's mission and with what we do here in this space in the name of Jesus.

[4 : 30] And imagine somebody was to scoop the whole lot up and place it into a building that was dedicated to worshipping an idol or idols. Think that and we're beginning to get into the minds of what it must have been like for Daniel and his contemporaries.

The brightest and the best, including Daniel and his friends, were scooped up. They were forced into exile. They were forced into training and then for three years, the other end of that training, they were put into service.

of the king. For Daniel and his friends, it was as though everything that was sacred and holy had been stripped away from them.

And it had gone. And they suddenly found themselves living in exile, surrounded by a society and a culture that worshipped idols. Let's just highlight two such prominent idols because I'm aware that in many ways this can seem so removed from our own cultural experience.

Yet, when we take a deeper look, we see that it's not quite so removed from our own experience. There were two particular idols that at the time within Babylon were worshipped.

[5 : 52] Baal and Asherah. Baal was the god of weather and the rain. And you would be worshipping Baal because you would want to invoke him as the god of rain because in an agricultural society that was associated with wealth.

Baal was on your side. Baal was on your side. You could make money. Then there was Asherah, the fertility god, who was worshipped in such a way that, without going into detail, actually involved a complete absence of boundaries when it came to sexual expression.

The god of sex. We're told that God actually allowed his people to be defeated and to be taken into exile.

The problem was not simply a case that people were beginning to worship these idols, but they wanted to worship Yahweh and worship these idols.

They didn't want to kind of give up Yahweh. After all, Yahweh, the Lord, the god, had set them free from slavery. God was faithful.

[7 : 24] God was good. It's just they also wanted these other gods. Alongside Yahweh, they also wanted the god that represented wealth and money.

And they also wanted the god that gave the green light to do whatever you want sexually. the gods, the idols of wealth and sex.

Not that much has changed since 605 BC. So, with all of this going on, Daniel and his friends, who clearly are faithful to God, as that story unfolds, find themselves in exile, how do they respond?

Well, let's consider how they might have responded. Firstly, they might have responded by just deciding to forget about the god that they had served previously.

that's a danger facing us. We could just decide to, well, forget all about him. They could have gone on a rant about how bad things are now.

[8 : 42] And that's a danger that we must be aware of as well. The danger as Christians that we just go off on a rant and go on about how bad everything is without actually thinking about how good God is and doing something about that.

They could have easily gone into a slump, a state of bitterness and resentment. God has just let us down. After all, they'd given their all for him.

They had been faithful to God and yet they had been scooped up and taken to a land and put in exile and forced to serve the king. And they could have carried around this resentment, well, why in my faithfulness to God has God let me down?

I don't claim to have the gift of prophecy. I don't. I can pretty well guarantee that among us listening now, somebody probably at some point has had that feeling, why God have you let me down?

Because that's part of life. That we can get that feeling that God has let us down. And if that's you, if that, if that accords with your experience and you feel that God has in some way let you down, I want to say to you, firstly, don't sweep that under the carpet, don't suppress that, don't pretend that that feeling isn't there.

[10 : 06] But rather take that feeling, own that feeling and bring it before God. Lay it before him. He's big enough to absorb it. And ask God to remind you in his own time, in his own way, by the power of his Holy Spirit, that he is there because he is.

Sometimes it may feel like God has let us down, but in fact he hasn't. The important thing is, is that we bring those feelings before God. Another possibility is that Daniel and his friends could have gone into despair.

And we can face that same kind of danger as Christians. We can look around us and we can think, what's coming to the world?

You know, nobody's interested in faith anymore. And you know, that old saying, the church is just one generation away from extinction. You know, the church is only one generation away from extinction.

But I don't say that from a place of despair. It's always been the case. The church is only ever one generation away from extinction because it is in the hands of every generation to make the gospel known.

[11 : 31] And we can see that from a place of despair or we can see that from a place of opportunity and hope. Sometimes people will say, well, we live in a, in Britain today, we live in a post-Christian society.

I'm not sure that we do. I think we live in a pre-Christian society. Because I find frequently now, more and more and more, having conversations with people who have had no experience of church or extremely limited experience of church.

And you get into a conversation about Jesus and about who Jesus is and about how amazing Jesus is and how he can transform your life. and people want to know more. So let's see it as an opportunity and to get into the mindset that we live in a pre-Christian society where people are hungry and thirsty to know about Jesus.

But despair is not the response that we see in Daniel and his friends. So what did Daniel and his friends do?

I want to just highlight two things. There are many more things that we could say. But in this particular passage, I want to highlight just two things. First is this. They knew their identity in God.

[12 : 55] We're told that Nebuchadnezzar gave them new names. Daniel, which means in Hebrew, God is my judge, was renamed Balthazar, which means Bel's prince, Bel being the primary Babylonian god.

Hananiah, which means the Lord is gracious, was renamed Shadrach, which means under the command of Aku, the moon god. Mishel, which means who is like the Lord, was renamed Mishak, which means guest of the king.

And Azariah, which means God is my helper, was renamed Abednego, which means servant of the god Nabu. Now, notice in the text, they don't actively, they don't seem to actively resist this renaming.

However, as the story continues, we find that the narrative retains their Hebrew names. The point is this, they were secure in their identity.

They didn't need to resist it because they knew who they were in God. And I want to suggest that to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, in any society, knowing who you are in Christ is the most important thing.

[14 : 20] To know that your identity is in him, that your citizenship ultimately is in him, that's the most important thing. And when we know that we are in Christ, that there is nothing that can take that away, that's the most important thing.

We live in a world, we live in a society in the West, that has an obsession with identity politics, where we are told that sexuality is the most important thing about you.

We live in a world of council culture, where Christian speakers are frequently deplatformed for daring to speak out. The church has, for some reason which I cannot begin to understand, taken on a weaponised version of inclusion that has far more to do with virtue signalling than with the gospel of grace.

But in this world gone mad, we are called to stick to the gospel which tells us that your identity lies in one thing and one thing alone and that is Christ.

That it is in him, that it is by his cross and by his resurrection that we are saved and held for all eternity. That defines who you are more than anything else, first and last.

[15 : 46] Daniel and his friends knew that their identity was secure in God because that is who they were defined by. And as a follower of Jesus, you are to be defined by nothing except Jesus in whom you are saved.

the second thing that this story tells us is that Daniel and his friends were unafraid to take a stand. They were unafraid to stand out from the crowd. Now, as part of being placed into exile and placed into the service of the king of Babylon, they were told that they would eat of the king's food. They were given a free ticket to the king's cafeteria. Now, you might be thinking, well, of everything else that has gone wrong for them, here's perhaps one thing that might remotely be described as a silver or rather golden lining.

But they resist it. We might think, why on earth would they not eat of the king's food? The text here doesn't spell it out in detail, but it's a reasonable, reasonable assumption to draw that it was for

spiritual reasons and that the food itself was almost certainly not kosher, that the food itself would have been, as part of the Babylonian culture, sacrificed to idols.

[17 : 24] And therefore, what they would do is they would sacrifice it to idols, but then the meat had already been sacrificed and therefore they may as well eat it. And so, therefore, to, a bit of a mixed image here, but to effectively kill two birds with one cow, they would eat the food that had been sacrificed to these idols.

And Dalian and his contemporaries knew that were they to do that, they would be forming a bond spiritually with everything that was against Yahweh and everything that Yahweh represents. And so they said, no, we're not going to do it. But notice the way they do it. They do it in a way that is respectful, a way that is polite, but for all that they're unwilling to compromise.

compromise. You know, I fear that we live in a society in which the church has lost its nerve and become afraid to take a stand and to be different and to challenge.

I fear that as a church we can become timid in proclaiming the message of salvation. The bold and challenging claim that Jesus alone can save you has become watered down to a safe and innocuous God is love and God loves you.

[18 : 53] Now that is true. It is very true that God is love and that God loves you. And the New Testament makes it very clear that that is true. But note that the term God's love is not once mentioned in the book of Acts.

When we see that first generation of believers sharing faith, sharing the gospel with those who they come across, not once do they mention God loves you.

That much is assumed. The first generation of disciples had a focus. To a culturally, religiously, and ethically pluralistic world, they knew that that focus had to be bold and uncompromising.

Jesus is Lord and you need him. their attention was not on trying to apologise for the boldness of that claim. Their attention was focused on solid historic and eyewitness evidence that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead.

So we do not find Paul in Athens surrounded by a religiously plurality of faiths trying to avoid treading on toes or upsetting anybody.

[20 : 11] Neither do we find Peter or Stephen or any of the apostles standing nervously and probably were nervous probably terrified but nevertheless we do not find them timid before the Sanhedrin worried that they might upset.

The first generation of Christians were uncompromisingly bold just as Daniel and his friends were uncompromisingly bold. Now I don't suggest for one moment that you walk up Hill Road tomorrow morning clutching a megaphone declaring to everybody that they're going to hell.

Please don't do that. If you do, don't tell them that you're from Christchurch. But what is more likely is that over the next few days you might get into a conversation with a friend about what did you do over the weekend?

And you might think of the things that you could tell them one of them being that you came to church to worship God.

And you might be tempted to think well I don't want to say that because they might think I'm a bit strange. Or I don't want to say that because that might lead to an awkward or uncomfortable conversation. I want to encourage you that if those and when those opportunities open up to be unafraid to seize those opportunities to share your faith in Jesus Christ.

[21 : 43] To be unafraid to stand out and to be different. Remembering that we do not live in a post Christian society. We live in a pre Christian society that is hungry and thirsty ever so for everything that only Jesus can offer.

In November 2004 you may remember this. Viktor Yushchenko stood for the presidency of Ukraine. He was fiercely opposed by the then ruling party.

He almost lost his life in his campaign. They tried to poison him. But he went through with it and on election day Yushchenko was comfortably in the lead.

But the ruling party tampered with the results. State controlled TV announced that day that Yushchenko had actually been defeated.

However in the corner of the screen somebody was signing to the deaf community. Her name was Natalia Dimitruk. And she refused to translate what she knew was a false message.

[23 : 02] And from the corner of the screen as the wider screen gave one message she signed they are lying to you. I am ashamed to translate these lies.

Yushchenko is our president. so what became known as the Orange Revolution was triggered.

There was a new election and Yushchenko eventually came to victory.

I share that with you as an image for us to take away as we think about what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus in our society. I want to suggest to you that each and every one of us is called to occupy the corner of that screen and to call out the lies.

To say don't believe the big screen. Don't believe the lies of the culture in which we live. Jesus and only Jesus can save you.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for the story of Daniel and how he was unafraid to dare to be different, to challenge that which was going on around him.

[24 : 33] Thank you that he did so because he knew his identity was in you. And Lord, we thank you for the way in which that story as it unfolds throughout the Hebrew scriptures and throughout the New Testament.

Not only for that first generation of believers in the book of Acts who knew who they were in you and proclaimed you with boldness clarity.

But thank you not only for them but throughout the whole of history as we look back and for those forebears of faith who have proclaimed you with faithfulness and with truth.

Lord, forgive us for when we have been cowardly in our faith. Forgive us when we have stepped back rather than stepped up.

forgive us for when we have winced with embarrassment or nervousness or timidity. But Lord, thank you that you never give up on us.

[25 : 41] Thank you that you died for each and every person. Thank you that you even died for those who would deny you. So Lord, help us like Daniel to know of our identity in you.

Help us to have that renewed confidence that we are in you and that we are saved not just for this life but for all eternity. And from that place of confidence and reassurance of knowing you and your love, give us that renewed strength to dare to be different, to dare to call out the lies of our culture and our society and to speak and to live the message of Jesus.

Help us to do that this day, this week and always until you call us home. In Jesus' name. Amen.