

The story of Daniel in the Lion's Den is surely among the most gripping in scripture.... who knows we might even find the odd contemporary parallel! A king trapped by a decision he will bitterly regret, setting in train a sequence of events he is then powerless to stop however unwelcome to him they may turn out to be. Scheming satraps (we might call them cabinet ministers), motivated by jealousy, plotting the downfall of a rival, one known for his success and all round excellence - well the comparisons had to run out at some stage!

In the biblical story, Daniel our hero and King Darius's most trusted adviser, is sent to his death because he cannot obey that king's prohibition on prayer to any god or man save himself. And a stone is placed over the mouth of the den of lions into which Daniel is cast.

Set among the Jewish exiles in Babylon in the 6th century BC but almost certainly written in the second, Daniel is renown not just for his virtue but also for his ability to interpret dreams and through his visions to foretell the future. That time shift is important because one of the reasons most scholars believe that

Daniel is written so many years after its apparent setting, is that the events predicted in his visions seem to relate to that later period particularly to the crisis that would arise for Jews living again in Judea, during the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes, the latest in the succession of foreign rulers of which Daniel's king was a forerunner.

Of course, some say there is no reason why a vision in the 6th century should not predict events in the 2nd. Indeed, in the 16th century AD, Martin Luther argued that Daniel's visions also referred to the struggles in which contemporary godly men were then engaged against the twin evils, as he saw it, of the Turks and the Pope.

But wisely, I think we are more likely today to see prophecy primarily as illuminating events that the writer may be experiencing rather than predicting those many centuries into the future. That of course does not mean that Old Testament prophecy has nothing to say to other periods of history. There are patterns to human behaviour we would be foolish to ignore. And even more significantly, scripture reveals

patterns in the ways God comes among us and shapes our world and our lives.

One such pattern that you will have noticed in the juxtaposition of our readings this evening is suggested by the stone that is placed over the den of lions. A good man, unjustly convicted, is left to die and the stone serves to emphasise the finality of that outcome. But in the morning, when the king goes to see what has happened, and the stone is presumably rolled away, he finds Daniel alive.

And in our New Testament reading from the end of Mark's gospel, women went in the morning to the tomb where Jesus had been laid. Instead of the stone that had been placed there they found a young man dressed in white who uses words common in scripture 'do not be afraid'. He explains why they need not fear, because 'Jesus has been raised'. And he tells them to go with the disciples to Galilee to meet Jesus there. But the women ignore his message, run away and say nothing to anyone because they are afraid. Afraid of what, I wonder. Afraid of being laughed at? Afraid of the incomprehensibility of what they had

seen? Afraid of what it may mean for their lives when they had perhaps looked forward to nursing their grief alone?

And according to the most ancient authorities and manuscripts Mark's gospel ends exactly there with nothing more than the double disobedience of the women who are both silent and afraid.

This is not how we usually imagine accounts of the Resurrection, though this is the earliest version of the earliest gospel. And so at least one of the various alternative longer endings are provided in all the versions of which I am aware - and in the case of the NRSV two. And certainly, it seems at first glance an odd ending to the story. Or is it? Is it not in fact, entirely in keeping with that gospel as a whole which is shot through with examples of: fear, astonishment, failure to understand, and failure to obey - though usually the disobedience consists of speaking when the command has been to keep silent. Could you not argue that the very terseness and painful honesty of this gospel, almost requires this kind of ending?

But we can assume that they do obey the most significant of the young man's instructions, which are to go with the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee, for how else would we know anything of this. Galilee is the place of discipleship. And it symbolises the real beginning of their discipleship, which has up to now been spectacularly unsuccessful as they have so consistently failed to understand Jesus.

There are two patterns here. The first we might think of as God's pattern. And the second, we might think of as ours. God's pattern - most completely manifested in the death and resurrection of Jesus - but pointed to by Daniel's story and countless others that it makes possible both in the bible and up to our own day, is that when human beings seek to act faithfully in the power and love of God, when we do what is loving and right whatever the consequences, when we reject the remorseless logic of the zero sum approach to life, and instead embrace the suffering that inevitably flows from short-sighted human selfishness, then we work with God's loving power which sustains all creation and which always has more resources of love and

forgiveness to overcome destruction, division, hatred and negativity.

And to my mind, that very sparse, and probably original, ending of Mark's gospel is the most compelling and convincing witness possible to the truth of Jesus's victory of love, and the definitive opening of new possibilities which this victory makes possible.

And our pattern, the response asked of us, which the absence from Mark's original ending of much detail about the response to the resurrection of those first disciples, inevitably and properly puts centre-stage, is the imperative for you and me now to take up the task of discipleship. What more encouragement do we need? Mark has been honest with us about the constant failure of the original disciples to understand, their betrayals of Jesus, their fear, as well as their puzzlement at the decisive turnaround of the resurrection and yet out of their response a whole new way of living has begun.

What have we got to lose? The vacuity and dead-ended nastiness of self-absorbed, divisive living has

rarely been as vividly apparent as it is today. If you want a positive, joyful life, if you are open to being a partner in God's work bringing his wonderful creation to fulfilment, if you want to step into the possibilities opened by the resurrection of Jesus to change the world, to bring light out of darkness, unity instead of division and hope instead of fear then live out your discipleship boldly or if you are not already then become a disciple, make Galilee a reality here and in all the places to which you will go in the coming months and years. Look for Jesus. He will be there waiting for you.