EDITORIAL

It seems everyone was right. Scotland, post-referendum, is a 'different place'—and so it the UK, although 'different' in what ways it is still too early to tell. In terms of Christian responses to the results, it has been encouraging to encounter a number of thoughtful reflections on the challenges facing the church in Scotland in the new political landscape. Of course, these challenges are largely the same as they were before the referendum, but even this strikes me as encouraging. Why? Because whatever may be the reality of the government under which Christians live, we relate to it as 'resident aliens' first, and citizens second.

The book of Daniel provides a particularly apt text for this sort of reflection. From youth to old age, Daniel—and his friends, in the vignettes in which they appear—are never less than worthy servants of the empire in which they live as aliens. In fact, they are much more than that. From youth to old age, however, their lives are a continual demonstration of the fact that, for the people of God, cooperation with the regime is possible, but equally, conflict with it is inevitable.

When we first see them in as the book opens, they are hostages finding their way in a new language, exposed to a new culture, perhaps even so relishing new possibilities. And yet, they are also isolated, taken from their families and segregated from their community. Lessons must already have been learned, however. Their 'education' requires of them a lifestyle which would be an affront to God. This circumstance is not part of any deliberate campaign to compromise their loyalties: on the contrary, it arises out of the empire's sincere desire for the betterment of its charges.

As the story unfolds, other sorts of relationships emerge. The parallels and echoes between the various episodes are widely noted by the commentators, but their distinctive modes of 'confrontation' are worth observing. The initial sense of benign paternalism that the Babylonian officials show their Jewish charges does not last long; neither does it plummet immediately into outright hostility.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2) provides opportunity for suprises of several kinds. The first is his seemingly unreasonable demand that not only the interpretation, but the dream itself be reported to him. (Has he forgotten it? has he only a hazy recollection to accompany his deeply troubled spirit? or is he suspicious of the interpretative powers of his 'wise men'?) The imminent destruction of the court sages endangers Daniel and his friends, too, but only as members of the company of disgraced courtiers. A further surprise, then, is Daniel's bold confidence to step into the breach (2:16), only after which he enlists his friends in urgent prayer

for God's mercy—a prayer which God graciously answers. Daniel is enabled to describe the dream and discern its meaning. Disaster to Jew and Gentile alike is averted. A third surprise slips by almost unnoticed: God has chosen the pagan king to be a recipient of divine revelation (2:29). God does work in surprising ways.

Only in the next phase, the story of the 'fiery furnace', does direct opposition to the Jews at court emerge. Every subject of the king—regardless of 'people, nation, or language'—is required to give obeisance to the image erected by Nebuchadnezzar. It is a measure designed to stoke the king's megalomania, rather than to oppress subject peoples. Still, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego alone refuse and thereby provoke the king's wrath after the matter has been reported to him by affronted 'Chaldeans', that is, Nebuchanezzar's fellow Babylonians. These three friends, like Daniel, have the confidence in God to place loyalty to the God whom they serve ahead of whatever is due to the king. The expression of their confidence is stirring and profound:

> O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter, for if so it must be, our God whom we serve is able to save us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will save us from your power, O king. But even if He does not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the statue of gold that you have set up. (Dan. 3:16b-18, JPS Tanakh)

Their confidence resides not in some favourable outcome but in the living God alone, no matter what risk their rightly-ordered loyalties bring.

The next moment of confontation in Daniel 5 tightens further the focus of the opposition. Another king, Belshazzar, holds a 'great feast', and during it calls for the 'vessels of gold' from the Jerusalem temple. It's difficult to see this as anything other than a calculated vaunting of this king over the God of that temple, and necessarily involves the desecration of the vessels devoted to His worship (cf. Dan. 6:4). The confrontation here, then, is not so much with the people of God, as with God himself. The 'writing on the wall' appears, and marks the end of Belshazzar's reign, and his life. Like his father Nebuchadnezzar, he is the recipient of divine revelation. But unlike the revelatory glimpse given Nebuchadnezzar, a personal disclosure made public which affirmed his human rule in long perspective, this one to Belshazzar—now public from the outset, but ending in the most personal manner possible—puts an end to human pretensions and is realized in a moment (Dan. 6:30).

The last of the 'court tales' takes the conflict between the people of God and regime to its most overt expression of hostility. There are resonances with a previous story, here with the legislation which embroils the

friends in opposing the state (Daniel 3). This time, however, the statute framed for 'Darius the Mede' is expressly designed to ensnare the devout Daniel at the very point of his worship of God (Dan. 6:12-13). On this occasion, the confession of confidence does not come from Daniel, as it had previously from his friends. Rather, Daniel remains silent while Darius speaks for him: 'Your God, whom you serve continually, will deliver you!' (Dan. 6:16). And He does. Still, the implication of Daniel's silence in the face of the threat tallies with the overt confession of his friends' speech at an earlier time: the nature of a presumed outcome does not influence the unswerving loyalty of God's people to their God.

The elderly Daniel's declaration comes only in the aftermath of deliverance. Given the way the narrative has unfolded—with the cynical legislation expressly framed to make Daniel's guilt inevitable—his affirmation to Darius gives pause (Dan. 6:22). Not only is Daniel innocent before his heavenly King, he asserts that his necessarily defiant actions in giving worship exclusively to God preserved the welfare of his earthly king as well.[1] There is an implication that had Daniel complied with the law, worse would have resulted for the king and, presumably, those he governed.

There is, then, a broad spectrum along which the engagement between God's people, living in a foreign land, and their ruling power takes place. From unwitting but misplaced 'benevolence', to deliberate and provocative oppression, and at each point along the way, the lesson for God's people remains the same: faithful living can only be maintained and nurtured by giving primary loyalty to Kingdom living. And in that sense, although the referendum has changed much—and the process of change rumbles on—for the church, the priority is not the cultivation of cooperation or influence, but remains the gospel and its claims, laden as that commitment is with risk and perhaps even danger.

[1] In fact, the Aramaic *ḥăbûlâ*, 'harm', which Daniel did not do to the king provides a precise counterpart to the 'injury' (root *ḥbl*) that the lions did *not* do to Daniel.

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