

Second Sunday before Advent 2016

Daniel 6; Matthew 13: 1 – 9, 18 – 23

The story of Daniel being thrown in the lions' den must be one of the best known and best loved stories in the Bible. I'm conscious I say that of quite a few stories in the Bible, particularly from the Old Testament. But I guess the fact is that the Bible is full of cracking stories which have born witness to god's saving grace – and the way people have wrestled to recognise it – not just for centuries but for millennia precisely because they are great stories which capture the imagination and stir the heart in response to God. And Daniel in the lions' den is right up there with the best of them.

Darius the Mede, weak leader, easily manipulated, first: arch-baddy, then: did a U-turn; and suddenly he's all God-fearing and promoting Daniel to high office. Well, I guess this week there will be plenty in the US – women, Mexicans, Latinos, Muslims, gay

people, anyone struggling to buy private health care – who will be praying for similar U-turns from Donald Trump. And they may not be disappointed! Is nine Trump U-turns there have been since Tuesday? I've lost count. Apparently he's decided Obama-care might not be quite so bad after all, now he's actually sat down with President Obama and found out what it's all about.

All we can say with certainty is that we live in very uncertain times. If a vote for Trump was vote against the establishment, it may well be his supporters have been conned. Equally, the future we're beginning might be a very dangerous and unstable place – the first UK politician to meet Donald Trump since the election was Nigel Farage! President Obama reminded us though that, whatever happens, tomorrow the sun will rise. I know that is incredibly trite, but it's also incredibly true; and reflecting on it helps us to endure. It's also the message of the Book of Daniel.

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The Book of Daniel is roller coaster of a ride in which weak and wicked regimes come and go and Daniel's fortunes rise and fall – or rather, fall and rise – with them. But God endures and, through trusting in God, Daniel endures. God doesn't make all the upheaval and the wickedness vanish as if by the waving of a magic wand, but he remains true throughout and his values are there to be returned to and embraced when it's propitious to do so.

But that is the case only because there were people like Daniel; people who were prepared patiently to wait for the Lord; people prepared courageously to keep alive the story of God's redeeming love and to sustain the vigil of prayer – even with the windows wide open as he did so.

Just to mix up this evening's readings a bit: the persistency and the consistency of Daniel's faith is a bit like him being good soil for the Word of God; or, from a Christian perspective, for the Gospel of Jesus

Christ. I know it's not quite true to say that good soil doesn't happen by accident. There are naturally fertile soils and naturally infertile soils. But I do think there's some mileage in making this point: if you are a gardener or a farmer, you've got to work hard at making your soil as good and productive as possible.

There is a requirement for discipline to create the conditions in which crops can grow when the time is right for them to do so. Similarly there is a requirement for spiritual discipline to create the right conditions for God's Kingdom to flourish when the time is right for it to do so. What we mustn't do is say: Trump's in; Christian liberal values of decency and tolerance and inclusivity have lost; we might as well pack up and go home.

We must “sing the Lord's song in a strange land.” We must continue proclaiming the Bible, telling the story of God's transforming love that's for everybody irrespective of ethnicity or faith tradition or gender or

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sexuality. We must maintain the vigil of prayer, of breaking open God's Word together and of gathering round his table to break bread together. That's how the spiritual soil in our hearts, the soil in our worshipping community is kept fertile, so that one day there will be crops: God's kingdom will come; justice and mercy will be seen. And what we believe we ask God to help us to show forth in our lives; lives committed to rejecting hatred, embracing the stranger, welcoming the unknown and spreading God's love.

Amen.