

## Sermon: St Andrew, Corbridge, Christ the King 2018, Choral Evensong

Reading: Daniel 5

Title: Under judgment

*May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

'The writing is on the wall'. That well known saying comes from tonight's first lesson from the Book of Daniel. Of course, when we hear someone use that phrase today, it normally means that a particular outcome is inevitable. So if a football team loses a string of matches, well, 'the writing is on the wall' for the manager. Doubtless in the corridors of Parliament, many will be whispering that 'the writing is on the wall for the Prime Minister'. Well, time will tell.

But the context in Daniel is rather different. The Book of Daniel was written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. It was a time of fierce persecution for the Jews, who were living under a great Syrian Empire ruled by the brilliant but unscrupulous Emperor Antiochus IV. Many Jews accommodated to the spirit of the age, but when the Jerusalem Temple was taken over and defiled as a heathen sanctuary, many Jews who stood firm suffered grievously and some perished. The Book of Daniel was written to try to encourage and strengthen them under persecution. Its powerful stories were set in the time of the Babylonian exile of long ago. In those days, God's people were living in a strange land, under what they regarded as a godless regime where practicing their faith was difficult, and it was easy to compromise. And their plight must have made them question God's sovereignty. Was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the Lord of the whole earth? Was God really a God who could save and restore? It is in Daniel, that we first read of a theology of resurrection.

Tonight's lesson sets out brilliantly the arrogance and folly that comes from unrighteous power. King Belshazzar of Babylon held a great feast. Inevitably, everyone got very drunk as the wine flowed. In this stupor, the King commanded that the vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem – God's vessels - that his father Nubuchadnezzar had plundered, should be brought into the dining chamber and used for the drunken orgy. So they did, but more than that, they praised the gods of gold and silver. They took what was holy to the Lord and made it idolatrous. Suddenly, a disembodied hand appeared, and wrote strange words in the plaster of the palace wall. The King and his guests were terrified and none of his courtiers could interpret the writing.

But there was a Jew named Daniel which means 'God judges' who had a spirit of interpretation and wisdom. Daniel interpreted the writing:

- Mene – God has numbered your days and brought your kingdom to an end
- Tekel - you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting
- Parsin – your kingdom will be divided and given to others.

And that very night King Belshazzar was killed. Yes, the writing was on the wall.

Sometimes in the Church, we shy away from the notion of judgment. We want to stress that God is love and goodness, compassionate and forbearing. And of course God is all those things. But our God is also the God of holiness, truth and justice. And many rulers and political systems, rather than seeking to rule by reflecting the righteousness of God, choose the ways of violence, oppression, tyranny, corruption and self-idolatry. And like the Jews under Antiochus or Belshazzar, many human lives have suffered the most godless and hideous cruelty and many have been grievously taken away. And for that fact alone, we need a grasp of God's judgment.

In the Psalms, the promise that God is coming to judge the world is met with joy:

*Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad;  
let the sea roar and all that fills it;  
let the hills be joyful and all that is in them,  
and let all the trees of the forest shout for joy.*

Why? Because the Lord is coming to judge the earth. And the Psalm concludes, 'he will judge the world with righteousness and the people with his truth'. God's coming as judge is joyful because his judgment will put things right, exposing evil and tyranny and remaking lives taken away; administering right judgment to the wicked, and restoring those denied justice; exposing lies and establishing truth. The coming of the Kingdom will be a cosmic reversal, because God's judgment is just.

You see for all the perpetrators of evil throughout human history, 'the writing is still on the wall'.

For God's judgment brings in a Kingdom where peace and justice will reign, and that is what our Advent hope proclaims, for that Kingdom has already dawned in the coming of Jesus – who in his own body judged the evil and tyranny that took him to the cross, and bore in his own body the sins of the race of Adam.

It is why stories matter. We read the stories of God's people. We read the stories of Jesus that speak of this Kingdom. We know in our hearts that for every kind of evil, the writing is on the wall. Meanwhile, for ourselves, we seek to follow the Jesus way, whose peaceable and perfect Kingdom stands firm for ever.