

Loyalty in Trails of Trials

The Book of Daniel is one of the most intriguing books of the Old Testament. Depending on which bible you pick up you will find the book of Daniel in one or in two places. An earlier writing in Hebrew and Aramaic relates a series of heroic valor to supply the captive Jews with needed courage and loyalty in the difficult time of the Babylonian captivity where their whole nation was displaced and challenged by forced pagan idolatry. Some time later, another author created several magnificent prayers, effectively embellishing the extract of the First Reading today. They were prayers of grief and pleading on one hand, recognizing their exile as due punishment for abandoning the law of God back in Israel; and a second one praising God in all parts of nature - sung by the three men in today's story while flames were flying all around them. We know this as the *Canticle of the Three Young Men* found in Morning Prayer on Sundays: *"Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord. Praise and exalt him above all forever."* It stands on its own as a poem of splendor magnifying the Lord in the elements of sun, moon, ice, snow, rivers, mountains, old men, young maidens etc all praising God. St Francis of Assisi was influenced by it in his familiar "Canticle of the Sun." And in the Catholic bible the two added prayers are inserted in the story line right at the point of today's readings. As such they would greatly enhance the sacred drama, rising above fear to praise of God under the mantle of Trust in Him.

When the Jewish leaders went about determining which books were to be accepted in their bible, around the beginning of the second century, one criterion was that the text had to be located in Hebrew. Since many original Hebrew manuscripts were lost only the translated ones in Greek remained. This was the case of several other books such as Macabees I and 2, Esther, Ruth, and Esdras. Protestant and Hebrew renderings of the Book of Daniel displace them outside of the book of Daniel as secondary, yet revered. Eastern

Orthodox and Catholic admit them with equal acceptance. Thus it depends on which bible you pick up whether the prayers are separate or not.

Note that the Christian Church – both the east and west, more than a thousand years before Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, had included them in ITS body of approved OT books. In the 16th century the Council of Trent then officially declared these scriptures to be sacred and canonical and to be accepted “*with equal devotion and reverence*”

Pinpointing the story itself, it is about a Jew, Daniel, who lived in the time of the forced deportation of the Jews to the Babylonian Captivity or Exile 5.5 centuries before Christ. The name **Daniel** means “**God is truth.**” And that is what rings forth through the entire book. Truth, Loyalty. And the gift of Wisdom and Courage carving out a powerful story line. And since these are most likely allegories, more like an “Everyman” story, the personification of a nation rather than an individual, they impart a stirring moral message of great significance to the reader, even today’s reader, amid difficult and dark times then, and maybe so today as well. The Book of Daniel was surely a constant companion of consolation not just in the Babylonian Exile, but in the *diaspora*, after Jerusalem was leveled and Israel ceased to exist, which Jesus predicted - to say nothing of the horror of the recent Nazi holocaust .

The first part deals with Daniel as a young lad along with his friends named ***Hananiah, Mishael*** and ***Azariah*** trained in the court of the king. Their names would carry special ring for a reader of Hebrew. They translate respectively, ***Hananiah***: God is gracious; ***Mishael***: God provides; and ***Azariah***: God has helped. All three denote specific ***power and grace*** befitting the story line in today’s First Reading. Power from God alone, nothing more needed, nothing less expected. It is that sort of trust that stamps the entire first part of the Book. However in today’s readings, the author has them as ***Shadrach, Misach, and Abednego***, and Daniel himself is given the name ***Beltshazzar***

all designed to obliterate the memory and power of the Hebrew God in the court of the tyrannical king Nebuchednezzar. For in the name was power. Some commentators on these adopted names allude to slaves of the Babylonian deities. The substitution is *crucial*, as indicative of demonic to the Hebrew reader. These men were positioned like breeders of false idols.

So here's the drama: these young men display ultimate super-heroic courage, totally loyal to God and their ancestry while maneuvering a survival tightrope in a persecuted land. Before this chapter, the king has already granted Daniel and his three friends high offices in the kingdom after Daniel's ability not only to guess the disturbing dream of the king but also interpret it – a miracle attainable only through the power of God. Even so there arises a faction who become jealous of Daniel's prowess and try to denounce not Daniel but his friends sharing in the governance of the province. And that is where we come in today.

What is the author trying to convey here? Mixed in these youths is *wisdom*, *assurance* and *stature* of greatness even in their *modest*, *humble* demeanor. Israel was a small nation, now reduced to being a slave to Babylon. The temple was gone, the kosher foods and laws were forbidden and as we know many suffered death rather than disobey the commands as demanded in the Torah. But at the same time the pagan culture was making all sort of inroads to reduce the memory of the Jews to nothing, to infiltrate their education and annihilate any trace of their prayer and temple. As in the later Roman times, enormous statues were built to venerate gods of various natural forces – the sun, the moon, and now a statue giving divinity to the king himself. We refer to the colosseum in Rome, that amphitheater where indeed bloody games were played. Roman martyrs were executed not so much there as in the nearby Circus Maximus, for blood-curdling sport. But nearby was the 90 foot gilded statue of Nero later set up at the juncture of the arena where all intoxicated by the bloodshed of the afternoon would see the Emperor's statue div-

inizing him in blazing sunlight. Nebuchadnezzar beat him to the punch centuries earlier, so the story tells it in Daniel, with his own golden statue.

As to the response of the Three Young Men, ominous threats would not condition their lives one iota. *“If our God, whom we serve, can save us from the white-hot furnace and from your hands, O king, may he save us! But even if he will not, know, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the golden statue that you set up.”* Let us examine the valor and courage penetrating those words. These men were intoxicated by something else – a ***fierce loyalty to the God of the covenant***, who though seemingly eclipsed more and more from the cultural scene in which these men were immersed, nonetheless would be faithful. Regardless of how He would respond in this instance they would not bow to any other God, as horrible as their death was to be. And note, this was no suicide, no funeral pyre in the Ganges either. They prayed to be ***saved*** of course. But that was ***secondary***. The Hebrew ***Shema*** acknowledging one God alone still had its effect and the author is stirring the hearts of his readers to maintain their loyalty and obedience to Yahweh in dark, foreboding and punishing times. And these young men were saved, rewarded for their obedience and loyalty to God in whom they ***really*** trust!

We will soon after Easter hear a similar reflection, though cut down a bit in its narrative: Peter and John after Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles will tell the leaders of the Jerusalem Temple that they will not stop preaching and teaching about Jesus the Christ. Despite threats and subsequent beatings, they reply: ***“Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges. It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard.”***

No need to continue to glorious litany of the names of saints who met their martyrdom witnessing to Christ: ***under no other name can we be saved***, among the first words uttered by Peter and other leaders already under per-

secution after Pentecost. Persecution, those followers of Christ would come to see, would be a *logical outcome of loyalty*, in defense of truth. So they constantly prayed for strength, as did the other church members. And note, that it was the religious *leaders* who were called first to witness. They held a certain joy and supreme confidence which in turn baffled and infuriated the status quo leadership of Rome, later Elizabethan England, the French Revolution, the Third Reich, and Stalin's and Mao tse Tung's gulags, to name just some of the most familiar opportunities through which *the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the Church*.

Today the attack on religion is horrific in Syria and in neighboring countries. Suffering continues in China, Myanmar, and various attacks on Christians, especially Catholics are meted out under the *scimitar* of Islam, too horrific to describe here; while, yes, honest efforts are made to draw together a sort of peace amidst seemingly irreconcilable differences that are far more than cultural. The men in the book of Daniel could have adapted to mere cultural change, as could be said of all ages. That that was not the issue. Offering incense, just a touch of it, was enough for Christians, supposedly at least, to be exempt from the scourge and the axe, torch or tooth under Caesar's firemen and lions. But even that bit of incense would violate the acknowledgement of one God and his Son, *under no other name can we be saved*.

Today in the United States there is attack against religion, and it is not always that subtle, though it is in the little chipping away in the courts, in the workplace, in the schools, huge time, and often not directly attacking God as was the case of the ancients against Jesus Christ, but somewhat obliquely. Today it is not yet a frontal attack – Nero the Colossus vs Jesus. But more like the French Revolution's "Equality, Fraternity, Liberty" as side swipes, as substitute statues, the Enlightenment in place of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, *under no other name can anyone be saved*. No, there *is* a God who saves, as Nebuchadnezzar and Caesar found out and eventually acknowl-

edged; a God who wants to share his love, but demands we respond in kind: ***If you love me keep my commandments.*** They are not suggestions!

It is in the areas of the ***commandments***, as a direct sequence to acknowledging God as author of everything good that is being attacked. Not ***how*** they should be observed. That is one thing. No, ***whether*** they exist or not, do they qualify as relevant to 21st century America. Too sweeping a statement? One could go through each commandment and list official endorsed violations in all. Is God or the Supreme Court the arbiter of Life? Taking the name of the Lord in vain? No, just dismissing Jesus' Name from public places altogether, schools, courts and even the military. Keeping Holy the Lord's Day? Traffic jams are not caused at churches on Sundays but rather ***malls*** and ***stadiums***. Honor father and mother? Many states are sanctioning not just one of each but two of one gender each. Thou shalt not kill? Planned Parenthood is up to 330,000 babies aborted – that means killed – each year with tax payer's funding. Adultery? Fornication? Are these words even in the vocabulary or are they too offensive for the status quo of tolerance? Tolerance of sin is the mark of least compassion one can imagine, because it leaves festering what may lead another to eternal damnation.

And ***religious freedom*** is being attacked under the HHS mandate which has generated some 94 court suits from dioceses to individual church affiliated organizations. These are plaintiffs about the health insurance plan which under the president's health care blueprint – Obamacare - includes ***contraceptives*** and ***abortifacients*** plainly contrary to the teaching of the Catholic and Orthodox and other churches, and which incidentally had been contrary to ALL mainstream Christian denominations until 1930 when the Anglican Church broke and others followed suit. Are we better off for it? And if so, what is the standard that assesses our families and marriages today as a positive betterment? That question itself aside, a clarion call should sound in the ears of all citizens that when this US administration in effect forces

adoption of insurance plans providing contraceptives and abortion-producing drugs as *medical* coverage the administration is violating the sovereignty of religion. It's violating that healthy separation which allows Church to safeguard its own moral teachings flowing from its beliefs.

The government does not *define morality and belief*. For even the state legal interpretation is subject to the morality God has planted in society. That is one reason why the decisions of a court are generally called Opinions, open to further review, not divine right! The freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights *start with religion* - not just Sunday worship or a place of worship to be protected – but religion takes worship into the public square, as did the Apostles, the courageous young men in the book of Daniel and of course everywhere else. Pentecost was celebrated in the streets, not sitting in an upper room, once the explosion of the Power of the Holy Spirit was received... *Going therefore teach ye all nations...* The lord's last words. Go the Mass is ended... to take what you got here, build out there!

Friends, join thousands of people in offering prayers for the Court's positive rejection of the HHS mandate which compels an insurance policy gravely interfering with Church teaching since its origins; and would force penalties in the range of \$100 per day against EACH employee.

In a longer range of things, we look back to the courage of the Three men about to be thrown into raging fire, or the martyrs, not only because of their valor for faith. We do so because when religion is attacked, when freedom of conscience is attacked by such mandates as in these cases now before the Court, there is another point to be made. *Rejection of religion breeds rejection of other rights*. The Communists under Lenin, Stalin, Mao and the Nazis under Hitler knew this as well. Silence the Church and it is easier to reshape thinking to fit totalitarian designs. That's already in the machinations of the Babylonian conquerors of ancient Israel. There may be people in our nation

who could care less about religious freedom being chipped away; but they ought to be wary, because *other rights then fall more easily*. our *speech*, and certainly the *right to life*. For on what basis would the map of God's plan as our founding fathers got it ensure balance and justice were we to lose the anchoring of religion? The *right to life* is so basic that no other right can in fact flow from it if we are not given the right to life from the very outset of our existence. And yet abortion is widespread, getting near the 60,000,000 mark since the genie was let out of the bottle in Roe v Wade. Still, if religious liberty is not protected, the very reason why we should not permit killing is weakened, inasmuch as the relation between God's plan and our living it out is gravely threatened by government intrusions. We cannot tolerate this.

We need to nip the intrusion in the bud, [and yes, we need to erect a wall, a good one, a wall of separating the garden of religious faith from an encroaching heavy handed forest, a secular aggressive government.] Pray each day for a fair, just and God-fearing decision – Opinion – to be rendered by the DC District Court in the case we at Priests for Life are arguing. We are the 4th out of 94 cases to file suit. Yes, 94 and growing. It is that serious. The oral arguments will take place on May 8, and that this will likely be the first oral argument before a federal appellate court on the *merits of the case* that the religious non-profits are bringing against the HHS mandate.. Pray please!

And pray for the courage to stand up and be counted, never be afraid to witness to Jesus Christ *under no other name can anyone be saved*, especially when the threats become more dire and the heat goes up beyond the comfort zone. Especially then we are called upon to be faithful. Like those three men, together we will not serve an alien god, nor a government which disregards the God of Truth and Life. For *under no other name can anyone be saved*, Praised be Jesus Christ, now and forever!