

## Column

Few Bible characters, Old or New Testament, have more relevance today than Daniel. While the story most chiefly associated with his life is his deliverance from the lion's den, there is much more to his story.

Daniel came from a noble family and was taken as young man to Babylon around 606 B.C. during the first deportation of the Jews. There in the best schools he prepared for service to the empire. During this period, he distinguished himself for wisdom, piety and adherence to the Mosaic law of his forefathers.

Daniel went on to hold what we might call civil service jobs, serving under a number of kings, including Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius the Mede and Cyrus. His remarkable period of service did not end until the last king, Cyrus, had issued a decree allowing those Jews who wished to return to their homeland. Daniel himself, however, remained in Babylon.

From Daniel, we can glean at least three pointers as to how to live in a society which has become unmoored from its Christian past and is drifting farther and farther away from that past.

Babylon was pagan to the core. The God of revelation and His precepts were not recognized. So increasingly it is with the society in which you and I live. What was said about the period of the Judges in the Old Testament – “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” – might be said of our day.

One example of society at large’s retreat into the darkness is the way the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, the day on which Christians since the very beginning marked the resurrection of Jesus, has gone from being a day of rest and worship to one virtually indistinguishable from any other day. Once in Christian lands you did not need a calendar to know that it was Sunday. No more.

We can learn from Daniel how to live in a pagan society. First, it would be not to spend too much time looking back. From all we are told, Daniel’s primary focus was not the ‘good old days’ in Jerusalem before the Jews’ captivity. He did pray daily in the

direction of that city, but his primary focus was being God's representative in the time and place he found himself. Not nostalgia, but meaningful action in the present was his main objective.

Surely the same should be true for us. We should remember the tree from which we are hewn. We should cherish our Christian heritage. At the same time, we cannot go back to that past. We must dare to be Daniel. For us, it is striving to be icons of Christ in the time and place God has planted us.

A second thing we can learn from Daniel is not to compromise . . . to be in the culture but not of it. For example, when commanded to bow down and worship an image made during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, along with his three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refused. The four feared God more than the king's fiery furnace.

We should follow the example of Daniel and his three friends. This does not mean, however, we have to "go to every fight to which we are invited." Rather, we must seek wisdom from on high to know which issues are primary and unnegotiable and

which are secondary and merit a more studied response. Daniel chose his fight carefully and prayerfully. We should too.

Finally, we can learn from Daniel the importance of working hard and doing a good job. That seemed to be his primary way of witness as he went about his civil service jobs. Even his critics could not deny this aspect of his character.

The same should be true of Christians today. Be faithful in your appointed duty, keep a positive and constructive spirit, be swift to praise and slow to criticize, be ready to share the hope that is within you . . . do these and you will be a 21<sup>st</sup> century Daniel.

More importantly in so doing you will fulfill our Lord's command in Matthew 5:16: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Living in a pagan society brings challenges but also opportunities. Look for the latter.

*O ALMIGHTY and most merciful God, of thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech thee, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things which thou commandest; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity).*

*The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.*