

## Hope despite (Daniel 3:1-28)

Today is the 17th of November - International Student Day and the Day of Struggle for Freedom and Democracy. It is a symbol of the fulfilled hopes of people who, under communist rule, did not lose hope that oppression and unfreedom could end despite all the circumstances. Human history and the present are full of such stories, and we do not have to go far to find parallels with the story of our country.

It was a time full of fear and uncertainty. Faith had to be hidden, its expression forbidden or ridiculed. The power demanded total obedience. You had to submit to their symbols and rituals, and if you refused, it could mean the end of your hopes for a better job, education for your children, or even a peaceful life. In schools you were taught that your God was not needed, children were encouraged to trust the state more than their parents. Churches were emptied because people were afraid of being associated with "enemies of the regime". Yet there were individuals who believed that their faith and conscience were worth more than comfort or security.

I'm not talking about recent history, I'm talking about a time long past when the Jews lived in Babylonian captivity, as we read about in the book of Daniel. After the conquest of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar, thousands were taken into captivity. The Babylonians did this cleverly - they deprived the Jewish people of their elites - priests, educated people, nobles and craftsmen. And this is where the story of the young men chosen for re-education takes place - they met the king's requirements: they were beautiful, talented and educated. (Daniel 1:4). They were to enter government service after three years of study (perhaps more like brainwashing). As part of their assimilation, they were stripped of their Jewish names, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah - the new names were Balthazar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Right at the beginning we can learn more about their character. The king commanded that they should receive delicacies and wine from the king's table. This too was part of a plan to rewrite their identity. For the Jews, food has a strong ritual and symbolic meaning that our young men did not want to give up and adapt to. See Daniel 1:8-17

In this episode, we see what Daniel and his friends were like - they chose to be faithful to the laws of their faith and set their priorities clearly in advance, not hesitating to stick to their convictions. After all, it's much harder to resist various pressures if we don't make it clear in advance when we're going to say stop. When I know what I want to be true to, it is much easier to resist temptation.

After three years, the king saw that they were superior to all others. We'll skip chapter 2 in the story here. Although they did not compromise their principles and kept the faith of their fathers - faith in the one God, Daniel gained a very high position in the royal court and his friends became governors of the entire province of Babylon at his intercession.

### Key text: Daniel 3:1-28

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were subjected to an attack on their identity - they lost their names, their language and their culture. The Babylonian king was smart to do this and let the conquered peoples keep their religion. But he was creating pressure for them to accept Babylonian gods on top of that.

Here again there is a parallel with the present. We live in a free society that tells us we can believe whatever we want. And yet we are subject to various pressures that force us to conform. Do we have golden statues too? What could they be? I guess they'll be different for different generations... You can put things in there from your context. The Jews knew God's commandment: thou shalt worship no other god but me. (Exodus 20:3-6) So what do you think? Would the young men keep their religion if they bowed down? Perhaps their faith would have gradually become a caricature, and they would have been rightly branded hypocrites. To have God as one of several things we rely on is to relegate him to a crutch.

This reflection today is the last in a series on hope ... it is subtitled Hope despite. Despite what or who? Most often, hope stands against circumstance.

But how do you have hope despite an adverse diagnosis? How do you have hope when I'm not well, things aren't getting better, and it's taking so long?

Daniel's friends remained faithful to the one living God and even in captivity, they were doing well. And then came the golden statue. They didn't fail, they didn't mess up, they trusted God, and what did they get out of it? A burning furnace. The prospect of an ugly death.

But they still had incredible courage and hope that was not based on their own abilities. They had a hope that was based on their faith in a God who is sovereign and faithful to His promises. There is something astounding in their response: "If the God we honor will save us, He will save us.... And even if he doesn't, we will not honor your gods."

The "even if they don't" is key. Their hope was not conditional on being saved. It was based on their relationship with the God they knew as the one who was good even when circumstances didn't go their way, the sovereign God who doesn't change depending on circumstances. This is hope in spite of - hope that doesn't end where pain, uncertainty, or fear begins.

What if they didn't have that hope? ...it would be hopeless. It would mean that King Nebuchadnezzar is the most powerful figure on the scene - he would have control over them. They would probably be trembling with fear - their earthly life would be all that mattered. And they would probably do anything to save themselves and survive. And they could somehow justify it to themselves - like bowing down, but just for show, and not actually worshipping the statue. And then ask God for forgiveness - I'm sure he'll understand. But if they did that, they would damage their witness to God. They could never again claim that God is sovereign over all.

Their attitude reminds me very much of the words of President Václav Havel: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something is worthwhile - no matter how it turns out."

Nowhere does the Bible or Christianity promise a comfortable life without trials and tribulations. We will encounter various "furnaces" ... we may not die in them, but they will come.

In Matthew 7:24-27 there is a record of Jesus talking to people about life. Jesus does not say there that the house on the rock will avoid the storm and shake only the other house that stands on the sand. Difficulties will befall everyone indiscriminately ... but the difference is what they do to us - whether we stand or fall.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 43:2-3): "*When you go through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not go over you: when you go through the fire, you will not be burned; and the flame will have no power over you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your saviour; I have given Egypt as a price for you, Ethiopia and Seba for you.*"

They knew that no matter what happened, if there really was a God, He was with them whether they died or not. We are not alone in this - God is holding our hand.

And what's interesting and very significant is that others see it with their own eyes. The king himself is the one who notices that there is someone extra in the furnace with them.

When we are going through difficult things, I wish the people around us could see that - that we have an unfathomable hope because we have someone beside us who is more powerful than what is coming at us.

That's why God didn't save them any other way - so that it wouldn't look like they were saved because of how great a believer they were, but so that it would be obvious to everyone that there was someone with them who was more powerful than the wrath of the king, more powerful than death.

How can we go through life with all the hardships without being crushed (burned)? By knowing that God is with us. We know this more realistically than the three young men who went to their deaths. Why is that? Because we know what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. If you know Him and believe Him, you can be a person of hope in all circumstances. If you are reluctant to play one card and build your life on God as a solid rock, know that his arms are open.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- Have you experienced or are you experiencing any pressures to conform to your environment?
- What, for you, are the "golden statues" that today's society "bows down" to? In what ways is it hard not to compromise?
- How does the fact that nothing has gotten out of God's hands, no matter the circumstances, change your experience of hope?