

The power and the glory

Dan 2

Tim Anderson 21/8/22

OK be honest with me,
how do you feel
when the political party you voted for loses the election?
I have to admit that I don't feel very happy either.
But I'm not crippled.
I have a friend who was not able to come to our playgroup
on the Monday after an election,
bear in mind that elections are decided on Saturday night,
she wasn't able to come to playgroup on Monday
because she was too messed up by the result of an election.
But if you think things can get a bit over the top here,
imagine living in the US.
Once upon a time after a Presidential Election,
almost all Americans would unite behind the person elected.
"This is my President.
I didn't vote for him,
but he was elected and now he's my president."
It's nothing like that these days.
It doesn't matter who is elected,
there will be great swathes of people on social media declaring,
"This is not my President".
Another group of people
will be calling the legitimacy of the vote into question.
"The ballot was rigged."
Another group of people will be declaring loudly
that the America they knew will be destroyed
and they will probably be leaving the country soon.
What are we seeing here?
The answer is that you are seeing peoples' idols.
Politics is about power.
When people look to politics for their salvation,
they are worshipping the idol of power.

It's foolish to look to politics for salvation.
It can never deliver.
Do you know that whoever you elect,
it will be a human being?
And every human being is corrupted by sin.
If you look to a fallen man for your salvation,
they will always disappoint.
The only good side about electing them
is that they won't be as corrupt as the ones who seize power
and rule without any checks and balances.
We need checks and balances,
humanly speaking,
they are the best defence against the evil of the human heart.

When we make power into an idol,
it's not a benign thing.
Power is an ugly idol.
And power tends to give people who worship it
a disregard for other people.
If you have to get your own way,
then you don't tend to care too much who gets hurt along the way.
You can see that in the Russian invasion of Ukraine right now.
Does Mr Putin seem particularly concerned
about the lives of Russian soldiers?
Forget about Ukrainian soldiers and civilians,
he's not bothered about his own soldiers dying.
Why is that?
He's meant to love the Russian people as their president.
But you see he worships power,
and so it hardens him against being moved
by the human impact of his actions.

How else can we recognise an idolatry of power?
Well it's not simply about being involved in politics.
The Bible actually commends Christians
for caring about their communities

and trying to work for the good of place where they live.
Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Jer 29 is a key example.
Being involved in the political process
is a way of trying to work for the good of the community.
But like all good things,
it can become an idol.

So how do we recognise the signs of idolatry?
I mentioned one earlier.

If your emotional responses to political events
get out of proportion to what has taken place.

I understand if you are devastated
if your country has just been invaded or something.

But if your team lost the election and you are having a meltdown,
that would be a sign of idolatry.

Another sign is when you demonise people who disagree with you.
It's one thing to disagree with points of view.

It's totally another thing to decide
that people who disagree with you are enemies.

People who vote for the other team are not enemies.

They just have a different idea about what is best for the country.

If you treat them as enemies,
that's a sign that power is an idol for you.

Another sign of idolatry
is when any value is turned into an absolute value.

There are lots of different things that we ought to value.

So for example in politics, we should value fairness.

It's good for people in the community to be treated fairly.

But we also should value rewarding hard work.

If some people work very hard,
they ought to get some benefit from that.

But if one value gets turned into something that trumps all other values,
then you are heading in the direction of idolatry.

CS Lewis has some wise words here.

"It's a mistake to think that some of our impulses -
say a mother's love for children or patriotism are good -

while others like sex or the fighting instinct are bad. There are situations where it is the duty of a married man to encourage his sexual impulse and a soldier to encourage the fighting instinct. There are also occasions where a mother's love for her own children or a man's love for his own country have to be suppressed or they will lead to unfairness for other people's children or countries." Any value that we turn into an absolute value will become an idol.

Well there are numerous stories in the Bible of people who were afflicted by the power idol.

Today we're looking at King Nebuchadnezzar.

He was the most powerful man in the world.

Politically speaking

he was far more powerful than any Israelite king ever was.

Israel was at best a regional power, a bit like Australia.

Strong if you compare our armies to Fiji.

Not so much if you compare them to China.

In Nebuchadnezzar's day,

Babylon was the great world power.

His empire stretched from modern day Turkey to Egypt,

Iraq, Iran, Israel, and Syria.

But he was feeling insecure and he couldn't sleep.

Why?

Well being a very powerful person tends to make you insecure, because you are well aware that there are lots of people who would like to take your power from you.

Nebuchadnezzar couldn't sleep and he was having bad dreams.

Often our dreams will contain things that we fear.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream contained an enormous dazzling statue, and the statue winds up getting smashed to pieces.

Now no doubt Nebuchadnezzar,

the most powerful person in the world at the time thought of himself as a giant of man.

He must have been worried

that the statue in his dream represented him in some way.

And unlike today,

when we would mostly say
that our dreams are just our subconscious processing stuff,
people in Nebuchadnezzar's day
thought that dreams were very significant
with messages for you from the gods.
Well in this case, Nebuchadnezzar was correct.
There was a message for him in his dream from the one true God.

Well Nebuchadnezzar wanted to find out the meaning of his dream.
But he also wanted to know that the wise man
who gave him the meaning was the real deal,
not just someone making up a meaning
to ingratiate himself with the king.

So he told all his wise men
that he wasn't going to tell them what the dream was,
they had to reveal the dream and the meaning to him.
God's man in the situation, Daniel was able to do it.
Which was lucky for the wise men in Babylon,
or they would all have been put to death by Nebuchadnezzar.
And the meaning of the dream
was not specifically about Nebuchadnezzar.

It was actually a dream about where true power lies.
The statue represented not Nebuchadnezzar himself,
but four great empires in the world.

The first of which was Nebuchadnezzar's empire.
And the stone that destroyed the four great empires
was cut out but not by human hands 2:34.

That is to say, it was cut out by God.
The stone represents the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God,
though it looks far less flashy than the empires of the world,
it actually outlasts them.

The kingdom of God is more powerful than the empires of the world
because its power comes from the only source of true power,
God.

Well at least on the surface of it,
Nebuchadnezzar got the message.
He fell prostrate before Daniel,
which was not a customary pose
for one of the cruellest and proud rulers of the ancient world.
And he said to Daniel,
2:47 "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of Kings".
He himself was a King,
so he was saying that Daniel's God is his Lord.
Humbling himself before the one true God.

Power is given by God to be used in the service of others,
not to be worshiped as an idol.
God sent Nebuchadnezzar a warning.
Though his response is initially encouraging,
it seems that his humility didn't last.

And that's a lesson for us.
Sometimes God gives us a lesson.
You might have had something really startle you,
and you realised that God is giving you a message.
"You need to change".
It's very easy to take the message seriously for a little while,
and then quickly fall back into your old ways.
Instead we need to turn to God every day.
"Lord you have promised that you will make me more like Jesus.
Please do what you have promised."

Nebuchadnezzar's humility didn't last long.
And so God sent him another dream.
The first dream of the statue was for his education.
It was God telling him
about God's long term plans to bring in his kingdom
and humble the arrogant worshipers of power.
The second dream is far more personal.
Basically the message is,

"You, Nebuchadnezzar have stepped over the line.
You are a worshipper of power.
I gave you a warning and you haven't amended your ways.
Now I will humble you."

The vision is of a great tree being cut down.
And an angel from heaven calls out this message,
4:14-15 "Cut down the tree and trim off its branches:
strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit.

Let the animals flee from under it
and the birds from its branches.

But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze,
remain in the ground, in the grass of the field."

That much is a scary dream.

But it gets even more worrisome.

As the angel continues talking,
he moves from referring to the tree as 'it'
to referring to it as 'he'.

Who on earth could he be referring to, Nebuchadnezzar?

"Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven,
and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth.
Let his mind be changed from that of a man
and let him be given the mind of an animal
till seven times pass for him."

No wonder Nebuchadnezzar was worried about this dream.

And he summoned Daniel to interpret the dream for him.

He says that the other wise men were not able to interpret the dream.

Now I'm no practiced dream interpreter,
but I reckon I could interpret this one.

The angel pretty much tells you what the dream means.

Most likely the other wise men
didn't want their necks to lose contact with their head
and so balked at giving the king bad news.

But Daniel had the courage to speak God's message to the king.

And the message doesn't only tell Nebuchadnezzar
what is going to happen, it tells him why.

4:17 "This decision is announced by messengers,

the holy ones declare the verdict,
so that the living may know
that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth
and gives them to anyone he wishes,
and sets over them the lowliest of people."
Basically, Nebuchadnezzar,
God is the boss not you,
and he takes powerful positions away from the power hungry
and gives them to the humble.

Here is the bottom line problem with an idolatry of power.
If you are grasping for power,
you are competing against God.
Power belongs to the Lord.
God doesn't like it when human beings try to muscle in
on his prerogative of ruling the world.
If he puts you in a position of power,
then you better exercise that power
with due deference to the one who gave it to you.

Well Daniel did his job.
He interpreted the dream for the king.
And he gave the King some wise advise.
Maybe the outcome of this dream is not set in concrete.
Maybe if you amend your ways,
God may yet have mercy on you.
Listen to Daniel's words:
4:27 "Therefore, your majesty, be pleased to accept my advice:
Renounce your sins by doing what is right,
and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed.
It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

Unfortunately for Nebuchadnezzar,
even though he sought out someone
to reveal the meaning of the dream to him,
he wasn't willing or able to turn away from his power idol.

Maybe he didn't even understand what it meant to turn away from his power idol.

It's like those situations where you explain something to someone, and they nod their head like they are understanding you, but then they turn around and do something that reveals they just don't get it.

It's just a year later,

Nebuchadnezzar is on the roof of his palace, and he says to himself,

4:30 "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and the glory of my majesty."

Whoops.

He's not giving any credit to God.

He's in love with his own power and achievement.

And bam.

Off to live like a wild animal for seven years.

That's the consequences of worshiping the power idol.

What's the right alternative?

Well you can't look past the Lord Jesus, can you?

Ph 2:6-9 "Who being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God

something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death -

even death on a cross."

Jesus didn't worship the power idol.

The devil tried to get Jesus to worship the power idol.

He offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world

if you will just fall down and worship me.

I can give you power,

just worship me.

Jesus said, 'Away from me Satan'.
Jesus' path was giving up power.
Jesus' path was the path of humble service.
It doesn't get any more powerless
than hanging naked on a cross,
nails through your hands and feet.

Can we follow in our saviour's footsteps?
In one sense, no we can't.
We are not called to die for the sins of the world.
Be we are called to pick up our cross and follow him.
We are called to lose our life for him and for the gospel.
Can you do that?

I don't think you can do that in your own strength.
I know I can't do that in my own strength.
The human lust for power and control is too deep within my heart.
If I try to wrestle against it,
I won't succeed.
How are you supposed to overcome a desire for power
by overpowering it?
It won't work.
The very desire to control my lust for power
is a lust for power over myself.
There's only one way.
I need to trust in God's promise.
God has promised that he will progressively remake me
in the image of his Son.
Paul tells the Colossians,
Col 3:10 "You have put on the new self,
which is being renewed in knowledge, in the image of its creator."
We need to cry out to God,
"Lord you have promised to renew me.
In your great power, please take away my longing for power.
Allow me to serve like Jesus served."