

Sermon on Wednesday 6 April 2022 at St Andrew's by Rev. Bill Church

(Reading from Daniel 3)

This long reading from Daniel – the story of the burning fiery furnace – has been a favourite of mystery plays and Sunday Schools.

It is masterpiece of storytelling. Generations have enjoyed hearing it and I bet the writer of Daniel enjoyed writing it down.

The main direction of the story is to echo common themes about the exile in Babylon, which we also see in the story of Joseph in Egypt:

- That the exiles are faithful to their God whatever the difficulties. Hence the refusal to worship and bow down to a pagan idol.
- That they survive and prosper in their land of exile. Hence at the end the three are promoted.
- That Nebuchadnezzar was a thoroughly nasty piece of work. Hence his tyrannical decree, and it was, of course, his soldiers who destroyed the Temple at Jerusalem and made off with all its treasures as booty.
- That nevertheless he was forced to acknowledge the power of the true God. Hence his amazing volte face when he sees the three come out of the furnace.

For modern readers, there is also another theme—the mismatch of power with faith and belief.

Nebuchadnezzar does not just require his many and diverse subjects to be law-abiding citizens; he does not just require them to respect or accept his huge golden idol – he requires them all on pain of death publicly to worship it.

If the present-day Nebuchadnezzar in the Kremlin really wants Ukrainians to be members of a close-knit greater Russian family, then he has gone about it in exactly the wrong way. You do not make people love you by hitting them over the head. You do not make people love your God by hitting them over the head.

Nebuchadnezzar at the end acknowledges the power of God but he does not learn the lesson about persuasion by argument and example. He orders terrible punishments for any who do not honour God.

Christians over time have not learned the lesson that Nebuchadnezzar should have learned – imposing religious belief does not work.

Love, service, explanation, presence, prayer and example are all better ways to hearts, minds and souls.