

**Saturday March 6th: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah: [Daniel 3:1-30](#):
'Look! I see four men...'**



*Pilgrims singing in St Anne's Church,
Jerusalem.*

Who are these three guys, you may well ask? Whilst Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were their Jewish birth names, we know them more familiarly by their Babylonian names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Along with Daniel they were born in Judah but after Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 BC, along with many of the great and good, they were forced into exile. They quickly found that

there were opportunities in King Nebuchadnezzar's court at Babylon for bright young men and they undertook training which opened doors to highly influential positions in the king's service (Daniel 1 v 5; 19-20).

However, given that Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were faithful Jews living and working in an alien culture with very different religious beliefs it was pretty much inevitable that they would come across a roadblock. It arrived in the shape of a ninety feet high golden image which, whilst it may or may not have been of the king himself, was designed as a very visible object of worship. Here the unstoppable force of absolute royal power meets the immovable object of a strongly held faith; every single person assembled on the plain of Dura that day, Jewish exiles included, was instructed to bow down to the statue.

From time to time in our own day, on the news or in a documentary, we see members of ruling assemblies in totalitarian states on their feet giving the dictator a standing ovation. What we are not able to see is what these acolytes are thinking privately; they all know they have no choice but to play the part of sycophants to protect their jobs and their lives. So it was for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah – they were caught between a rock and hard place whereby they had to choose between betraying their Jewish beliefs and disobeying the king's command.

Their loyalty to God led them to a fiery furnace blazing even hotter than the king's anger at their disobedience. The story of their deliverance from the fire which didn't burn a hair of their heads and the presence of a fourth (presumably angelic) human figure in the fire with them vindicates the stand they have taken and leads to profound change in Nebuchadnezzar. He, of course, goes the whole hog with dire consequences promised now for anybody uttering a word against 'the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego' (v 29). It is worth noting in passing that the king

has not become a convert as a result of this remarkable deliverance, God is still 'their own God' (v28).

In the list of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, the reference to those who 'quenched the fury of the flames' (v 34) is very likely a nod to this story. However, whilst much of that chapter is about those delivered by God from all kinds of trials and tribulations, it goes on to list those whose struggles did not have such a happy outcome (v 35-38) and where there was no miraculous divine intervention to save people from prison, persecution, isolation and death.

This inconsistency of fate for those whose faith leads to conflict with religious and political leaders continues in the New Testament. Whilst James is put to death by the sword (Acts 12 v 2), Peter is subsequently rescued from incarceration by an angel (Acts 12 v 6-10). This surely does not mean that Peter mattered more than James. Testimonies from the 260 million Christians persecuted for their faith today suggest the same pattern (or lack of it). Whilst some, either through their own efforts or with help from organisations supporting them such as Open Doors (www.opendoorsuk.org), have been able to support themselves and live in safety, others have suffered less happy outcomes. The week before these words were written 39 people were murdered in the Democratic Republic of Congo just because they were Christians. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians are being held in appalling conditions in labour camps in North Korea because of their faith.

Whilst there are many wonderful stories of answers to prayers and an enormous amount of prayerful work continues to be done in support of Christians who live day by day with the threats of losing their jobs, families or even their lives, not everybody can be brought into a safe place.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, were denounced by their colleagues out of jealousy (v 8), no doubt, at their rise through the ranks of the government administration. Their answer after they were hauled before the king speaks volumes. They did have faith that God will deliver them from the fiery furnace and yet, '...even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods...' (v 18). They were fully prepared to pay the price if on this occasion there is no divine intervention. There is an implicit acknowledgement here that God is not always at hand with a 'get out of jail free' card but there is a loyalty to God that will face the consequences, whatever they may be.

In our own lives there may well be moments when the situation we find ourselves in leads to a potential conflict with our faith. We may not be taken off to prison or murdered for our beliefs but we might be ostracised, laughed at, marginalised, scorned or misunderstood. In our working life we may be asked to collude with a

decision that, for instance, unnecessarily threatens people's livelihoods here or overseas or that involves, at the very least, being economical with the truth. It might be that saying no to something we know to be wrong costs a friendship or carries a financial penalty. There are some tough choices to be made sometimes and the consequences of doing the right thing (or not doing the wrong thing) can be unpredictable.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah remind us that loyalty to God has to come first and that our lives need to be shaped around our faith rather than the other way round. This will sometimes require much prayerful thinking; knowing what is the right course of action can be difficult to fathom and there may well be subtle nuances to take into account. There may be problems whichever way we look! Faith can be costly. Jesus not only gave up the joy of heaven but lived a life of service that took him inevitably to the cross (Phil 2 v 6-8). Whilst Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah emerged unharmed from the heat of the fire, there was no divine rescue from the agony of crucifixion for Jesus; no legions of angels appeared to carry him to safety as he was arrested, tried, mocked, sentenced, flogged and killed.

Yet that was not where the story ended; if it was then all those who have suffered for doing the right thing, including Jesus, would have suffered in vain. It is the resurrection that points us to a hope that takes us beyond such things as fiery furnaces to the righting of all wrongs and injustices as God's kingdom of love, peace and fullness of life prevails. The writer of Hebrews has a vision of Christ at the right hand of God and exhorts us to 'not grow weary and lose heart' (Heb 12 v 3). Whatever difficulties, contradictions and costly decision making we may have to endure, our living hope is focused on an inheritance that, as Peter puts it, 'can never perish, spoil or fade, (1 Peter 1 v 4).

Questions: Have you ever experienced conflict at work or in any other context between what you have asked to do and what you knew to be right? How did you resolve the dilemma?

Prayer: Lord, guide us when we have difficult decisions to make and need to know the right course of action. Give us the strength to do what we know is right and to be the people you want us to be. Amen.