

5th Wednesday of Lent 2021

Daniel 3:14-20, 91-92, 95

King Nebuchadnezzar said:

“Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you will not serve my god, or worship the golden statue that I set up?”

Be ready now to fall down and worship the statue I had made, whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet, flute, lyre, harp, psaltery, bagpipe, and all the other musical instruments; otherwise, you shall be instantly cast into the white-hot furnace; and who is the God who can deliver you out of my hands?”

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar, “There is no need for us to defend ourselves before you in this matter.

If our God, whom we serve, can save us from the white-hot furnace and from your hands, O king, may he save us!

But even if he will not, know, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the golden statue that you set up.”

King Nebuchadnezzar’s face became livid with utter rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times more than usual and had some of the strongest men in his army bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and cast them into the white-hot furnace.

Nebuchadnezzar rose in haste and asked his nobles, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?”

“Assuredly, O king,” they answered. “But,” he replied, “I see four men unfettered and unhurt, walking in the fire, and the fourth looks like a son of God.”

Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who sent his angel to deliver the servants who trusted in him; they disobeyed the royal command and yielded their bodies rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.”

Responsorial Psalm

Daniel 3:52, 53, 54, 55, 56

*R. (52b) Glory and praise for ever!
“Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our fathers,
praiseworthy and exalted above all forever;
And blessed is your holy and glorious name,
praiseworthy and exalted above all for all ages.”*

*R. Glory and praise for ever!
“Blessed are you in the temple of your holy glory,
praiseworthy and exalted above all forever.*

*R. Glory and praise for ever!
“Blessed are you on the throne of your kingdom,
praiseworthy and exalted above all forever.”*

*R. Glory and praise for ever!
“Blessed are you who look into the depths from your throne upon the cherubim;
praiseworthy and exalted above all forever.”*

R. Glory and praise for ever!

*“Blessed are you in the firmament of heaven,
praiseworthy and glorious forever.”
R. Glory and praise for ever!*

John 8:31-42

Jesus said to those Jews who believed in him, “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How can you say, ‘You will become free’?”

Jesus answered them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin.

A slave does not remain in a household forever, but a son always remains. So if the Son frees you, then you will truly be free.

I know that you are descendants of Abraham. But you are trying to kill me, because my word has no room among you.

I tell you what I have seen in the Father’s presence; then do what you have heard from the Father.”

They answered and said to him, “Our father is Abraham.”

Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works of Abraham.

But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I

*heard from God; Abraham did not do this. You are doing the works of your father!”
So they said to him, “We were not born of fornication.*

We have one Father, God.”

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and am here; I did not come on my own, but he sent me.”



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If our God, whom we serve, can save us from the white-hot furnace and from your hands, O king, may he save us!

But even if he will not, know, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the golden statue that you set up.”

That is the answer to the tyrant, Nebuchadnezzar, from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. We heard how an angel preserved them in the hottest of flames prompting Nebuchadnezzar to be converted, heart and soul.

Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who sent his angel to deliver the servants who trusted in him.”

With our human sense of justice, we could say that God rewarded the boys’ faith by rescuing them from the furnace. But, if we think so, we’d be missing the point. Our guys do not miss the point. While they certainly ask for divine intervention, they have no expectation of such. It does not matter. What matters is that they remain faithful, regardless of the result. The miracle is certainly appreciated by our guys, for sure, but the purpose of the miracle is to be a sign to the Babylonians, that God, and God alone, is God.

If Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had succumbed to the flames, their martyrdom would be included with the lists of martyrs who inspire our faith today.

God is faithful. He made us for eternity. He assures us of his eternal mercy if we would only embrace his love.

God the Father sent his only begotten Son to be offered in sacrificial love for us. Jesus calls us to pick up his cross and follow him on the path of sacrifice for the other, for love of the other.

It is said that our faith is built on the blood of the martyrs. A perfect example of that were the 32 young Christian men martyred on June 3, 1886 in Uganda.

On June 3, 1886, thirty-two young men, pages of the court of King Mwanga of Buganda, were burned to death at Namugongo by King Mwanga for their refusal to renounce Christianity. In the following months many other Christians throughout the country died by spear or fire for their faith.ⁱ

(I encourage you to read a fuller story at: <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/176.html>)

The Namugongo martyrdoms produced a result entirely opposite to Mwanga's intentions. The example of these martyrs, who walked to their deaths singing hymns and praying for their enemies, so inspired many of the bystanders that they began to seek instruction from the remaining Christians. Within a few years the original handful of converts had multiplied many times and spread far beyond the court. The martyrs had left the indelible impression that Christianity was truly African, not simply a white man's religion. Most of the missionary work was carried out by Africans rather than by white missionaries, and Christianity spread steadily. Uganda now has the largest percentage of professed Christians of any nation in Africa.ⁱⁱ

It is the “singing of hymns and praying” that got to me. I remember stories from the tradition about Christians singing and praying as they marched to their martyrdom in the Roman arena.

What kind of faith is it that’s possessed by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego... by the martyrs during Roman persecution... by the Ugandan martyrs in 1886... and the 7-8,000 Christians martyred in 2020?ⁱⁱⁱ

It sounds like a scary kind of faith to me. It promises no worldly security of life and breath. It does offer the promise of eternal bliss. It offers a sense of peace and joy in the midst of suffering in the here and now. It is the faith of love, of a love that withholds nothing, gives everything and finds true life in God’s Kingdom now and forever.

In Night Prayer (Compline) we end our prayers with a petition:

May the all-powerful Lord grant us a restful night and a peaceful death.

Now, as a former police officer I had been sent to a number of calls involving fatalities. Some have been peaceful. Some have been cruelly violent.

I’m certainly allowed to express my preferences on how I wish to exit this life. I would like the mythological Grim Reaper to be delicate about the matter... more gentle than grim.

However, I have no vote in this. And I can testify from personal witness, that the level of violence in one's death has absolutely nothing to do with a person's deservedness. Jesus had breathed his last after an excruciating ordeal.

Yet the peaceful death for which I ask in my Night Prayer is my petition for a grace-filled death, a death that knows the consolation of the 22nd Psalm prayed by Jesus during his own extremis:

*For he has not spurned or disdained the misery of this poor wretch,
did not turn away from me,
but heard me when I cried out. (v.25)*

At the end, may I have the opportunity to offer up as Jesus did:

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. (Mt 23:46)

I was just talking to a friend and asked him if he had his last 10-second prayer. This had been suggested to me by a friend who knew I had a hazardous occupation (remember that the most dangerous thing any of us do is drive a car).

If an oncoming truck has crossed the centerline, if I fall from a precipice, if my boat is sinking in perilous waters, what do I cry out to the heavens? It would be natural to scream, "Ohhhh [expletive]!! But, in my imagination I'd be embarrassed to have started, "Ohhhh" on this side, only to finish with the expletive on the other side. ;-)

Although, I've heard folks are pretty understanding and merciful on the other side, I'd rather my first words there were the finish of my "Jesus, Mary & Joseph" or "Jesus, have mercy" here.

If you want to have that prayer with you at that time of peril, I recommend that you practice it in some way daily, so it is easily retrieved at the terminus.

Having that last-of-life prayer is part of a "peaceful death". It promises to be grace-filled. If I give my life to Christ (and to my brothers and sisters through Christ), I may hope for a grace-filled life. If I give my death to Christ (and in Christ), may I hope for a grace-filled transition to our Father.

May I live and die in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. For it is in dying that we truly live. May our life and may our death be an inspiration of faith for others as they sojourn this world. May I conclude with this inspiring closing prayer.

O God, by whose providence the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church: grant that we who remember before you the blessed martyrs of Uganda, may, like them, be steadfast in our faith in Jesus Christ, to whom they gave obedience, even unto death, and by their sacrifice brought forth a

plentiful harvest; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.^{iv}



ⁱ <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/176.html>

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24864587>

^{iv} <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/176.html>