

The Writing on the Wall

. . . for Organised Christianity

World events sometimes make us 'sit up and take notice'. Perhaps recent crises in the Middle East have made us realise how fragile world peace is. Other factors emerge more quietly and we may not notice their subtle effects. We shall see more of those shortly.

Belshazzar, king of Babylon, did not take any notice. He was oblivious to the fact that his great empire, built up by his ancestor Nebuchadnezzar, was about to be overthrown and divided, and that he himself would die. Perhaps he thought that things had been the same for so long that nothing was going to change. He was wrong!

In **Daniel 5**, we read the well-known story of Belshazzar's feast, when a hand appeared and wrote in the plaster on the wall. Apart from the scariness of that event, Belshazzar was left with two problems:

- 1) he couldn't read the writing. . . and
- 2) even if he could have read it, he couldn't understand it.

Fortunately for Belshazzar, Daniel was both a linguist and a man of God. When he read the words, though, all they seemed to talk about was the currency! It was as if we had seen the writing say, "£50 notes, £50 notes, £1 coins and loose change."

Most units of currency are based on weighed amounts of precious metal, and Babylonian currency was no exception. The *shekel* was the unit, weighed against a standard lump of silver. The *mina* was simply a number of shekels, in this case 50, counted out. *Peres* (plural *parsin*) was change, either smaller, divided-up lumps of silver or low value coins. Now, with the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, Daniel reads it to mean, "Counted, counted, weighed and divided" and the meaning begins to emerge.

The days of both the Babylonian empire and Belshazzar's own rule had been counted, and the total had now been reached. As we would say, his days had been numbered, and now the number had come up.

Just as *shekels* used in the marketplace could be checked against the standard official *shekel*, and any shortfall noted, so Belshazzar personally had been checked out and found deficient. The reasons for this are clearly stated in **Daniel 5:17-23**. Belshazzar knew only too well that his ancestor Nebuchadnezzar had fallen into judgement from God because he had become arrogant and ignored the rule of God above all (see **Daniel 4**). In spite of that, Belshazzar had exalted himself against the Lord and used the

utensils plundered from the temple in Jerusalem in his wild party in honour of idols made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. He had not humbled himself before the one true God - he was definitely light in the balance!

Fragmentation of the former glory of Babylon was certain. It would now be just small change in the political scene. God's warning to Nebuchadnezzar had been disregarded and Babylon was unusable.

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Why are we looking at these events from ancient history? Are there any parallels for us? I believe there are, and that they relate to two aspects of our lives:

- 1) Organised Christianity
- 2) Personal life

Just as we often remember adverts and forget the product, the danger is that we will remember Belshazzar's feast and choose to ignore its application to our own situations. With adverts, this is often because we do not like the product or are not interested in it. When God speaks to us, we often ignore his voice because we do not like what he is saying. Perhaps the implications are too challenging to our present outlook. We turn off from what he is saying and soon lose interest. This is **very** dangerous! (See **Hebrews 3:7-19**)

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Present-day organised Christianity, like the Babylonian empire, is largely (but thankfully, not entirely) built upon man's achievement and his ability to control and organise. There are many groups of Christians with their own clearly defined loyalties to doctrines, people and traditions. Societies and companies exist to promote particular interests and tackle specific tasks. It looks very secure.

This may be obvious on a national or global scale, but it is also true in our local situation. If we see that there are many activities going on, lots of meetings with lots of people, we readily equate that with success and feel safe.

Jesus spoke of a different approach. "*My kingdom is not of this world*", he said to Pilate (**John 18:36**) It is not from here, does not have its origins on earth, is not governed by the same principles as other groups, societies and companies. If it were, he said, his servants would fight to preserve it. As it is, they don't.

Present-day christendom still bears many of the hallmarks of institutionalised religion. We are quick to blame the Roman emperor Constantine for institutionalising Christianity and trying to join church and

state but rather slow to see that we are still promoting the same structures. If anyone threatens them, we run to their defence.

For example, if we see that our society no longer upholds Christian values, we protest that it should. Why? "*My kingdom*", said Jesus, "*is not of this world*". Yes, we have the responsibility to act as salt and light in society, to show up what is wrong and call people to repentance, but no right to expect society to conform or to use protest and petition to try to force the issue. (See **Matthew 5:13-16**.)

If we will not respond in willing obedience to the Lord and put our priorities in line with his, he has no options left except judgement. When this comes, we will most likely label it 'persecution', but the Father's purpose is to purify his Church. (**1 Peter 4:12-17**)

The European Union has recently proposed a new Employment Directive which seems to say that it will not permit Christian charities, for example, to only employ Christians, but will force them to employ anyone who wishes to apply and fulfils all the other employment requirements.

Vigorous Christian protest has resulted, but what for? The right to be fairly treated? The right to be recognised in the world order of things? Can none of us see God's merciful hand of judgement on our man-made institutions, bringing us back to his priorities?

Can you imagine the early church protesting to the emperor Nero for recognition of their rights under the Roman constitution not to be persecuted or thrown to the lions? Why not?

They had seen that the kingdom they were part of was nothing to do with the present world order of things. They were in fact part of the new world order which would only be put in place when the King whom God had appointed eventually returned to rule on earth.

In Thessalonica (**Acts 17:1-9**), Paul and his friends were accused of insurrection against Caesar because they said there was "*another king, Jesus*". They were not interested in fiddling with secular society to make it better but in bringing people into the kingdom of God, in preparation for the return of the King and the visible establishment of his kingdom on earth. The whole New Testament makes it clear that changed lives result from coming into the kingdom, and the 'salt and light' effect will affect society around them, but it is a result, a by-product, not the main aim.

When the judgement of Communist persecution came in Eastern Europe and China, the organised and established Christian groups were easy targets for infiltration, take-over and control. The real believers who survived went 'underground'. Informal, unorganised groups of believers who had no official identity could not be easily found by the authorities and

so could not be broken up so easily. If the leaders were caught, the groups just went on meeting together to praise and worship the Lord.

The result was that the kingdom of God was extended. The Church grew beyond all previous expectation. Long before the Communist regimes were overthrown, the persecuted believers were growing in numbers and spiritual life.

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Why do we persist in investing in man-made organisations and structures, none of which will stand the test of God's judgement? **1 Corinthians 3:10-15** and **Hebrews 12:25-29** both speak of God's judgement on man-made, temporary things and things built of the wrong materials.

Sometimes the foundation of new life in Christ has been laid but the superstructure is all man-made. God's judgement, described as fire and shaking, will make sure that these things do not survive. So why do we waste our energy, time and money on them?

"Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?" (Isaiah 55:2)

Apart from anything else, our man-made structures are usually totally unsuitable for new believers. Instead of being able to help them grow in their knowledge and experience of the grace of God, they perpetuate the traditions of men. Jesus' comments about old wineskins are very appropriate. (**Mark 2:22**)

1 Corinthians 3 makes it clear that it is essential to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. To our shame, we have to admit that we have tried to build where there is no foundation; tried to see 'church' built out of lives that have no basis in the miracle of new birth. How foolish, when the Lord Jesus himself said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" and "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit"* (**John 3:3,6**)

If we *have* been born again, we have already been transferred out of Satan's domain of darkness into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ (**Colossians 1:13&14**). We are the recipients of God's own kingdom which is therefore not affected by his judgement of shaking. (See **Hebrews 12:25-29**.) Living in that kingdom is very different from traditional religious observance, as we shall see.

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