

One of the things I hear again and again when I am talking to people about faith, especially when people are struggling with faith, is that they are disappointed, or disillusioned in their faith. Usually, this dissatisfaction comes from the fact that they had an expectation that in becoming a Christian somehow life would be easier or better. When the realisation sets in that life, with all of its ups and downs, knocks and bumps continues on as normal (and indeed sometimes seems to get harder) they become disillusioned.

God no longer seems real, prayers become pointless because they appear to have gone unanswered. This frustration is sometimes increased because on top of all of this church leaders, ministers, elders or even friends in the church show they are still human and capable of disappointing, just like everyone else.

For some this realisation that the ideal picture they had imagined is not realistic shakes their faith to the very core.

This series of visions that Daniel had, and that we have been reading about these last weeks, were given to him by God in order to prepare Daniel and the people of God for a return to Jerusalem which was coming soon.

Just as we can sometimes have an unrealistic expectation of what a life of faith looks like, so Daniel and his people also had that same unrealistic expectation. All of their hope was set on a return home. Jerusalem, the temple, a strong and secure city wall protecting them; all of this symbolised a strong relationship with God. A prosperous city, a strong nation was seen as living in and enjoying God's blessing.

God, in preparing his people for a return home was saying to them, don't set your hope on the wrong thing, don't base all your expectations on the wrong thing. Yes, you will return to Jerusalem, yes, the temple will be rebuilt – but actually you have already shown that you can't maintain a relationship with me in this way. You have shown you cannot be faithful to my law; your hearts always wander away from me to something else.

Don't look in hope to something that you have already failed to maintain, because no matter how much you say to me now that things will be different. I know you; I know how you will live, and I know you cannot be faithful – and actually I want you to admit this and know this as well because for our relationship to work, I am going to have to do something new.

All of these visions that Daniel experienced pointed to a city and way of life that would remain broken. God was setting something in place that would mean the people couldn't depend on the security of the city or the sanctity of the temple as a sign that they were in a good relationship with God.

In the prophesy of the seventy sevens in Daniel chapter 9 we get a glimpse of what this new way of relating to God will look like when we are told the ***anointed one will be put to death and have nothing***. (Daniel 9:26) A glimpse of Jesus and what will happen to him.

This actually is at the heart of understanding all of these incredible visions.

Daniel such has been the seriousness of my people's unfaithfulness that we cannot just go back to the way things were. You are in exile in Babylon because we cannot continue to live together. When you look at your city, the home we had together and see it in ruins it is to be a reminder of just how much damage has been done to our relationship – and even when you rebuild it, it won't be the same and you and I will both know that. These visions of continuing wars and insecurity and terrible things happening in the temple and in the city, in the home we shared together; they will be a continual reminder that while you have moved back in, all is not well.

But Daniel, I still love you. You are still my bride, you are still the people I have chosen and although you can do nothing to fix our relationship, there is something I can do, but you need to trust me, you need to love me and not the things I gave you and so those things will be taken away, they will be desecrated, destroyed, demeaned – so that you will love me – and I will give myself to you, so that we can be together again.

Daniel, these visions are not sent to frighten you into loving me, these visions are so that you see there is something more to our relationship than the place where we lived together. These visions are to show you that even though the place we called home is being taken away, I will stay with you and so look to me.

Folks we live in a time of real uncertainty. World events are changing the order of things that we have grown up with, and maybe even trusting in. We live at a time when our church is openly talking about having to change in quite drastic ways. The churches I moved here from are experiencing that change. Second Kilrea is now part of a process where three churches are being merged together. Moneydig, instead of having its own minister is now part of stated supply arrangement, depending on the support of a neighbouring congregation.

Our Kirk Session, along with every other Kirk Session within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is having to answer difficult questions about our future, how we need to change. As we navigate all this change, we can begin to feel like Daniel and his friends who longed for the security of how things were in the past because our hope, our confidence has been in the familiar and not in God.

Our security has been in the things we do, the way we worship, the traditions we cherish; even though, deep down, we know that these things have always brought, yes, a sense of the familiar, but also disappointment because they have failed us, they depend on people like me and you in order to work.

Folks are we the generation God is speaking to in a similar way that he spoke to Daniel? We might not be getting visions of wars and terrible suffering, but we are seeing a church reducing in size and influence – has anyone seen Trevor Gribben on TV being interviewed as the moderator elect?

Is God taking away our position in society, is he taking away our security, our ability to survive and function as we always have done, is it so incredibly difficult to get leaders to ensure the church will function, because our hope has been in the things God gave us, rather than in God himself?

The good news in each of Daniel's visions, including this complicated vision of war after war in chapter 11 is that finally it will all end. God will prevail, he will finally restore his people, and we will see that clearly next week as Wesley takes us through the final vision of the end times. But

we cannot and we are not to just sit through everything that happens before that patiently waiting. These visions are a call not just to return home, but to return to God. Today, the world we live in, the church we are part of is a call to put our trust in God once more, to make him the focus of our relationship not the church or anything else. The way in which we do that is to remember that all of this, anything that depends on human effort will only ever disappoint and so we are to turn to Jesus.

It is only because he was **put to death with nothing** that our relationship with God is not only restored but maintained. Today's world, today's circumstances are all about being called back to Christ. So, where is our hope, what do we believe, where do we find our security – in the things of God, the way things have always been – or in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Only Jesus fulfils, only Jesus can provide not only what Daniel longed for when he looked to Jerusalem and home, but what we long for when we look to the church.

The promise is that one day the church will be all we hope it to be, all we need it to be, but to get to that point our hope, our confidence, our faith it must only be in Jesus.