**Week 5 - Courage to live counter-culturally**

**Bible Reading: Daniel 6:1-23**

***Testimony subject – How has God has given you courage to live in a way that is different from society?***

**Introduction**

* Daniel and other exceptional people were made to serve the king in Babylon. Jerusalem and Judeah had been conquered, many of its people had been taken into exile in Babylon and new rules applied to them. These included rules to forget their own faith and practices, and instead to bow to Babylon’s deities and to undo practices passed down from God through previous generations of Israelites.
* The book of Daniel seeks to call people back to devotion to God, to challenge people to be faithful to God again and to stop people falling away from the ways God had told them. The Babylonian world Daniel lived in was intolerant of Jewish worship and lifestyle and was demanding they followed Babylonian ways.
* Consider the relationship between religion and society today. For many, Sunday is just another day, and religious worship practised only by a minority. Trust in God is misunderstood, trust in religious leaders is questioned, and the Church is seen as having very little relevance to our day. Our world is not dissimilar from the society Daniel was a part of.

**Daniel had certain spiritual practices in place**

* Daniel had an understanding of what God had done for the Jewish people in the past and believed that he would bring about his Kingdom in the future. He was loyal to God and therefore had spiritual practices in his life that he would follow. He prayed three times a day, and he looked after his physical body and did not overindulge in unhealthy choices.
* He was totally convinced that God’s will is to provide his faithful ones with power to withstand the present difficulties and to reward them in the future.
* Spiritual practices include choosing to be in the presence of God each day, being familiar with the teaching of Scripture, trusting God with all areas of our lives and being open to God’s leading in all the choices of our lives.
* A discipline of any kind means a person has to be committed to improving and practising, both on the days when it’s easy and on the days it’s difficult. Ask any athlete how it feels to get up early on a cold winter’s morning to train. Ask musicians about the discipline of practising every day. The same kind of commitment is required for spiritual disciplines.

**The king was impressed with Daniel**

* Daniel’s integrity and demeanour impressed the king so much that he was given promotions, and eventually the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.
* Those who were already leading the kingdom were jealous and wanted to find some loophole, some irregularity in Daniel that would bring him down. But they could find ‘no corruption in him’ (Daniel 6:4).
* As with Esther last week, the political consultants manipulated the king to bring about a law that would bring Daniel down. They devised a plan to outlaw any worship except worship of the king.
* Daniel continued his spiritual practices (Daniel 6:10). So the punishment was arranged. The king was distressed, but he had agreed the new law. Daniel is placed in a cage of lions, but the king hoped Daniel’s God would rescue him. What an impression Daniel’s faithfulness to his God must have made on the king!
* It is interesting to read the stories of people who were put to death because of their Christian faith. They still believed that God would have his way. For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian and pastor. His last words were, ‘This is the end – but for me, the beginning of life.’ He was hanged in 1945 at the age of 39 at a Nazi concentration camp, 11 days before the camp was liberated by American troops.

**Leaving an impression**

* The man of faith was rewarded, and the king decreed that people should now fear and revere the God of Daniel.
* To help to consider what counter-cultural living looks like, turn to Matthew chapters 5 to 7. See how, in many ways, this teaching of Jesus is counter-cultural even today.
* What impression do we leave behind us? Do we want to know?
* Daniel’s faith, honesty, integrity and dependence on God left a lasting impression on the king.

**Application and response**

* Our world changes so quickly**.** We can associate with the words of Paul in Romans 12:2: ‘Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.’
* To live differently for God means not taking the easy option. It involves courageous decisions that will be often misunderstood and ridiculed. We need to support each other to stand firm in our faith.
* Who has impressed you by their qualities of faith, honesty, integrity and courage?
* What people do we strive to be like because of their faith in God?
* What would it take for us to be seen as faith-filled disciples and leave our impression on the world?