

Standout: Practically Prophetic

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I've just got back from holiday. We were in India to celebrate the wedding of Ande and Esther - which was a week-long celebration leading up to a beautiful ceremony on the beach. India was wonderful. The people warm and friendly. The experiences interesting and enjoyable. But one aspect was challenging – the stark contrast between rich and poor. Travelling from one destination to another, we could often see examples of poverty that stood in stark contrast to the comfortable holiday we enjoyed.

Coming back to the UK, I've been pondering some of the contrasts we face in our Western world. We've just got back from Hillsong Conference – an inspiring, uplifting few days; with thousands of people worshipping God in the O2 arena. But, despite our hopes for a brighter future, the challenges facing both the church and society are many and varied.

Rising levels of loneliness and increasing social isolation. Financial inequality, the increasing reliance on food banks, the number of families living below the poverty line. Challenges with identity – especially amongst young people – driving an increase in eating disorders and issues with body image. These issues fall in stark contrast to the comfort that we often enjoy.

Politically, it feels like there is more anxiety and division than ever – both here and overseas. We have the President of the USA tweeting capital letter threats in response to threatening words from Iran. Here in the UK, we have a country divided by its views on Brexit – facing such uncertainty and division that it seems like all the other work of government has ground to a halt.

Challenges come too on an individual level. We are aware of the occasions when they occur in our own lives, but also the challenges facing people we know. Some are common with society's challenges – financial difficulties, relationship breakdowns. Other personal challenges – health difficulties, employment issues – are commonplace too. Some challenges are less clear, but no less detrimental – as we interact with people struggling with difficult decisions; facing uncertainty; or searching for wisdom and understanding.

We have talked much over the past few weeks about it means to be a standout. The dictionary defines a standout as “a person of exceptional quality or ability”. The idea of standing out too speaks of being different, of being distinguishable from the crowd. I want to suggest today that our world needs these standout people, as much now as ever. I think a standout is someone that can provide answers for some of the deeper questions that people are asking. A standout helps people find solutions for the challenges they face; and provides support through the process. A standout is someone that makes a difference – in the lives of those around them and in society at large.

But how could we become those people? What might be required of us to become that kind of a standout? How could we make that kind of difference in our world?

In 1 Chronicles 12, we find what is perhaps my favourite single line description of anyone in the Bible. It is a line I love because I am very much attracted to the idea of becoming the type of person it describes. The passage is describing the armies that rallied to David's side. In verse 32, it says this...

1 Chronicles 12:32a - from Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do

Men who understood the times; and knew what Israel should do. What a great description! These are two key characteristics of a standout person. We need to understand the times – to know what's going on in the world around us; and in the lives of the people in our world. But we also need to know what to do. Providing social commentary is one thing; providing social solutions is quite another. Standout people don't just see the problem, they see the path too through to a better future. They see the challenges; but they also see a better way. But how can we become like that?

Over the past couple months, we've been exploring off and on, the life of a man who had both these qualities. Daniel. Daniel went from prisoner of war to de facto ruler of the kingdom of Babylon. He was effectively trafficked as a teenager, to be brainwashed by the king in a foreign land; but found influence and significance that helped the nation, brought much glory to God and ultimately led to freedom for his people too.

Daniel stood out because he had an understanding of the times and he knew what those he served should do. But if I'm being really honest, I've been avoiding half of the book of Daniel in my messages over the last couple of months. Because while Daniel chapters 1 through 6 describes the life of Daniel; chapters 7 through 12 are rather more challenging material. Daniel is classified by Biblical scholars as one of the Major Prophets. The latter chapters outline the extensive prophecies that Daniel described.

There is a temptation, for me at least, to split Daniel's prophecies off from the description of his life. Yet the reality is that they are one and the same. In the later chapters, Daniel speaks of a future that is revealed to him by God, describing what will one day come to pass. The first six chapters are no less prophetic – they're just more practical. Daniel applies his prophetic edge to the situations in front of him. He brings wisdom and insight revealed to him by God, presenting it to kings and nobles, outlining the future prospects and possibilities of some of the most powerful men in the known world.

I wonder if we could be as practically prophetic. If we too could bring wisdom and insight into the day to day challenges we've already outlined. If we could find understanding for our present situation and outline a more positive future for the people in our world. I'm not saying that God is calling us all to be prophets, as such, but that a prophetic edge can characterise each of our lives. That just as Daniel brings insight and understanding into his day to day work life, so we too can be practically prophetic as we go about our daily lives.

In each early chapter, we could find keys to being practically prophetic, but we'll explore chapter 2 today. In Daniel 2, we read of how the king – Nebuchadnezzar – has a dream that troubles him so much he cannot sleep. He calls his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and

astrologers to him; and asks them to interpret the dream. But there's a twist. He won't tell them what the dream was. His occult advisors challenge this, suggesting that what the king asks cannot be done. The king becomes so angry he commands that they be put to death.

The king's men then went looking for Daniel and his friends, as they too were part of the group now sentenced to be killed. Daniel though seeks an audience with the king. He asks for time to interpret the dream. He then gets together with his mates - Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah – and together they pray that God will provide the answers they need. Their prayerful petition is powerful. God reveals to Daniel the mystery of the dream and its meaning. Daniel in turn passes this on to the king. Nebuchadnezzar is so impressed he falls on the ground before Daniel – praising God and appointing Daniel to rule over the entire province of Babylon – with his three friends becoming administrators too.

From this chapter, I think there are three key lessons we can learn about becoming practically prophetic – about being people who understand the times and know what to do.

1) See beneath the surface and beyond the present situation

Daniel sees more than the king's other advisers – both in his understanding of the king's experience and in his capacity to outline what is to come. I find it interesting that the king refuses to tell his advisors what he has experienced. When they press him on it, he becomes increasingly agitated, as we read in verse 9. He accuses them of playing for time, and then...

Daniel 2:9 - 9 If you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me."

There is a resonance here with our 21st century experience. People can be reluctant to be open or honest about their difficulties. They are uncomfortable telling others when they're struggling or facing difficulties. I wonder if that is what we see in part in the king's response – perhaps he is scared of what he has seen, and afraid of what they will tell him.

There's a sense too that he's had a bad experience. He says they have "conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things". The king does not trust them. He doubts they have the answers. He doubts they can help. I wonder if we see that in our world too, especially if we seek to speak to people about Jesus. There is wariness perhaps of church, an anxiety about whether we're real or really live out what we say we believe.

To find our prophetic edge, we need to be prepared to stop and pay attention. To listen carefully to those in our world when they speak. We may need to be consistent, even persistent, in our approach, if people are to open up to us about the troubles they face. We need to pay attention to what's going on in the lives of those around us. As Pastor Tom has encouraged us, we need to answer the questions people are actually asking – and to understand those, we need to actually listen to what they say,

In medical school, we're taught the importance of listening for a full minute after our first question – because people won't share important information if you interrupt too soon.

We're taught too to specifically ask about people's ideas, concerns and expectations – because people often won't share those details unless explicitly asked. We're taught that because we're all inclined at times to listen for the next break to say something, rather than truly engaging with what is said. We need to learn to listen not for our gap to speak but to better understand.

Daniel does not just see deeper, he also sees further. He outlines a future across many generations to come. We need to see further. To see beyond present suffering into eternal glory. That's part of the power of worship – it lifts our eyes off our present situation and onto the goodness and glory of God. Daniel sees beyond the other advisors in part because his understanding is framed by the expansiveness of God. It connects in with the sense of God working across the ages. As Daniel prays in verses 20 to 23...

Daniel 2:20-23 - ... "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. 21 He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. 22 He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him. 23 I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors: You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king."

Through Daniel's words, you get a sense of his understanding of how God is at work across the ages. If we are to be practically prophetic, we need to both see beneath the surface to understand what is going on in people's lives, but also beyond the present situation – framing our expectation in the context of God's goodness worked out across the seasons.

Which brings us on to the second key lesson...

2) Seek wisdom, understanding and insight in prayer

When Daniel hears of the king's threat to kill all his advisors, he gathers his friends together and they call out to God for understanding. We've read his words as he praises God for revealing the mystery; and Daniel frames his response to the king with these words...

Daniel 2:27-28a - 27 Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, 28 but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries..."

Daniel is clear that God is the source of his wisdom and insight. If we want to help those in our world to find answers that are beyond us, we need to seek God's guidance in prayer.

This is a pattern in the life of Daniel. In Daniel 6, we read of how a later king decrees that no one can pray to anyone but him – and of how anyone that does will be thrown into the lion's den. Despite the threat, Daniel continues to pray three times a day – "just as he had done before" (**Daniel 6:10**). Another translation says "just as he had always done", while another "as was his custom since early days". Daniel knew that his success in life was based on his diligence in prayer, regardless of what obstacles were presented against him.

If we are to find solutions to the challenges of our society, to know answers to the issues of those we know, we need to be similarly diligent in seeking God in prayer. We often think that wisdom comes from age – and there is some truth in that. But God is far more reliable source of wisdom than experience alone. As Daniel clearly states, God “gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning”. God is Daniel’s source of “wisdom and power”. Wisdom comes not just from time spent on Earth, but from time spent walking with God.

When we seek God for wisdom, we should ask not just for insight for our own lives; but also for our spheres of influence and for the people in our world. A willingness to expand our prayer to include the challenges of our world and the people in our world will change the way we pray and the effectiveness of our prayers. As Pastor Chris Hodges challenged us at Hillsong Conference – if God answered all your prayers, would it change the world or would it just change you?

To be practically prophetic – to understand the times and know what to do – we need to firstly see beneath the surface and beyond the present situation; secondly seek wisdom, understanding and insight in prayer; and thirdly...

3) Speak with confidence, with clarity and with care

We have already seen something of the boldness with which Daniel approaches Nebuchadnezzar. He is confident of the answers he presents, because he is confident that the insight is from God, not from himself. He tells the king of how another kingdom that will rise after his, not shying away from reminding the king of his own mortality. Daniel speaks with a clarity informed by Godly understanding – clearly outlining what is to come.

But Daniel also speaks with care. Verse 16 records that Daniel asked first for time to interpret the dream, coming back later once he had insight to bring. His words to the king later too are full of honour and reverence – they are full of praise for Nebuchadnezzar, as well as insight about what is to come. We need to be similarly sensitive when we speak. To frame our words with care.

I fear that too often the wisdom of the church has been dismissed because of the tone with which it has been delivered. The church is seen as judgemental, hypocritical and uncaring – in part because of what we have chosen to focus on, but in part because of the tone with which we have spoken. We cannot expect people to listen to the insight and understanding we have for them if we do not deliver it in a caring manner. People do not care what you know until they know that you care.

At times the prophets were brash, bold and abrasive in their declarations – speaking in stark terms in order to shock people into response. Daniel though gives us a sense of a different way - one far more suitable for our modern world. He allows God’s prophetic voice to speak subtly and sensitively as he goes about his daily business. The first 6 chapters of this Major Prophet dominated by his work in government, and not his overt prophecies of what was to come.

We see in Jesus a similar sensitivity. His words for the religious people of His day were stark and direct; but when He spoke to those far from God He did so with compassion and care. Through Jesus, God reaches out with love and acceptance. He leads with grace; then follows with truth. When we speak with God-given insight – when we know what to do – we should speak with confidence and clarity, but also with care. Because people do not care what you know until they know that you care.

We need to finish this morning, but I hope today has inspired you – that you can be a catalyst for change amongst those in your world and in our world at large. God is looking for people who will stand out, not as prophets alone, but with a prophetic edge which speaks wisdom, insight and understanding into individual lives and into wider society. If we would see beneath the surface and beyond the present situation; seek wisdom, understanding and insight in prayer; and speak with confidence, clarity and care then I believe God could do something powerful both in us and through us. We can stand out as beacons of hope in the midst of uncertainty; of peace in the midst of anxiety; of comfort in the midst of despair. We can help people find direction, fulfilment, acceptance and value. We can communicate love and grace as well as truth. We can provide a light in the dark times; support in challenging times; and strength when the going gets tough. Let's follow Daniel's example; and let's believe for the kind of impact and influence that marked his life to define our lives as well.

Let's pray.