“The Most High”
Daniel 4

So our reading today is from Daniel chapter 4.
By way of background, Nebuchadnezzar has another dream – a dream he remembers this time.
A dream about a massive tree, so massive that it can be seen everywhere in the world.
However, an angel, a messenger of God appears and commands that the tree be cut down but let it remain as a stump.
It is to drenched in dew and has its mind changed from a man to animal.

So our first reading this morning is the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream.

Nebuchadnezzar, arrogant and proud as he is, is humbled; he finally acknowledges the Most High God.

So for us it’s a story the glories in the greatness of God; a God who is unrivalled in His power and might.
He is sovereign.
He is the King of heaven.
He does as he pleases.

But what I felt to talk about this morning is this: stories like this and others, especially in the Old Testament, have their critics.

Critics would say, “Well that’s a bit rich isn’t it? It fine for this God to humble Nebuchadnezzar but then comes across just as arrogant.”

They say, for example, “What kind of God needs to be worshipped and praised? In fact, is so needy He commands it and envious when others receive it?”

Not only that but they go on to say, the God we encounter in the Bible is not only arrogant but he is jealous, petty, perpetually angry and a control freak?

“How would you respond to that?”

Now you may be thinking, who are these critics??? (You may never have encountered them).

Well, roughly two decades ago a group appeared called the “New Atheists”, not just an atheist but “New Atheists” emerged.

Do you want to know the difference?

An atheist is live-and-let live when it comes to religion.
If you ask the for there views, *they’ll tell you in no uncertain terms – but* you can have yours as well.

A “New Atheist” on the other hand, does not think live-and-let live.
Religions everywhere – particularly the Christian faith – should actively be questioned and criticised and discredited at every opportunity.

In particular they take issue with the God of Daniel, the God of the Old Testament.

Richard Dawkins, is probably the most well-known of the New Atheists, wrote:

> "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

So when God is painted like that it’s no wonder some people shy away from the Old Testament.
You may say he is the Most High God but I don’t want anything to do with Him.

It has to be said that the New Atheists have faded in popularity but their ideas are still around; every now coming to the surface in the media and so forth.

So I do think it is important to speak to these criticisms when they arise or at least know how to respond, even for ourselves.

So,
Is God arrogant?

The critics would say, this God is often so God-centred that it appears as He is an attention seeker who craves praise.
In other words, He's proud.
He's vain.
He's obsessed with His own superiority - the God *most* high.

Well for one, we need to qualify our terms.
Pride is an inflated view of ourselves and our abilities.
To be proud is to have a false or inaccurate of who we really are.

Humility is having a realistic assessment of ourselves – both our strengths and weaknesses.

> False humility is equally out of touch.
> For example, it would be wrong for Adele to say she's not a very good singer, or Leo Messi to say he's a terrible football player, or Richie McCaw to say he was never that good at playing rugby.

A true response would be gratitude for what we have.

Nebuchadnezzar clearly preoccupied with himself and his achievements – he had had an overinflated view of himself referring to his own mighty power and glory.

So what about God.
For one, God does not have an overinflated view of Himself.
He has a realistic view of himself, not a false or exaggerated one.

We also need to remind ourselves that God doesn't *need* our worship nor does he crave it.
God is Triune - from all eternity the Father, Son and Spirit dwelt in other centred, mutual self-giving love.
The Father rejoicing in the Son and the Spirit, the Son rejoicing in the Father and the Spirit, the Holy Spirit rejoicing in the Father and the Son.
Before anything ever was God is pre-eminently love.
Then something amazing happened: out of this self-giving love, they created the universe, they created us.
Their love overflowed.

They didn't need too – God didn't need to be loved, or thanked or worshipped.
God knew perfect love, before the creation of time and space itself.
But out of this love humanity and all creation itself was brought into being.
They wanted to share this love.

In fact, He comes to us in humility in the Jesus; as a baby born in a manager and suffering who died on the Roman cross for our sins – again so that we might share in His love.
No other God has ever done anything like this

God isn't arrogant. He is not always fishing for compliments.
Worship is a perfectly reasonable response to God's love, goodness, beauty, power and truth.

So what about jealousy?
Is God jealous and petty?

Jealousy can be a virtue or a vice.
Jealousy that is self-centred and is jealous at the success of others is a vice.

Scripture does say God is jealous towards His people.
But is it a petty jealousy to desire our love in the face of rival gods or to be angry if we chase after idols?
If God is so the Most High then surely idols don't really matter???

Yet the jealousy God has is the kind a parent feels for a child or even more so, a lover feels for their beloved.

In Scripture God is a relational being who lovingly attaches himself to human beings for their good and wellbeing.
He faithfully commits Himself to His people to be their loving and wise ruler.
And over and over in the Old Testament God is described as giving Himself to Israel like what we find in marital intimacy.
In other words, God's love for Israel is like that of a passionate spouse.

> A missionary was talking to a Christian couple in Europe and somehow the subject of adultery came up in the conversation. The seemingly unassuming Scandinavian wife said that if her husband ever cheated on her, "I vill shoot him!!!"
> The husband knew she wasn't kidding.

This is the depth of jealousy God expresses; jealousy like the kind that is aroused like a husband or wife who finds their spouse flirting with someone else or being cheated on.
God's jealousy is an appropriate jealousy; as one who's love has been spurned and rejected.

What's more, other gods and idols are always deceptive and seductive – promising much but leading us away from the only one who can truly satisfy our deepest longings.

God is jealous for your good.
He doesn't want to see us choose paths that brings chaos and hurt into our lives and into the lives of those we love.
God is the all-good Creator and giver of life.
When we engage in life-denying ways the God's jealousy surfaces in the hope that a person would abandon death seeking goals.

Linked in with jealousy is often the question of God's anger.
Is God perpetually angry?

Uncomfortable as it is, God is not always even keeled, reasonable and never gets upset with people.

The is no doubt that in Scripture, God is at times angered but what he sees.

Again anger rational response to wrong and evil.
In a world marked by greed, tyrannies, lies and deceit and spin, suffering and cruelty and sadness and exploitation, anger is an appropriate response.

To be apathetic or indifferent would show that something is wrong inside of us.

God is the same.
He sees the hurt, the pain, brought on the world and he is incensed.

The angel says to Nebuchadnezzar:

> "Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

When God does finally act in Nebuchadnezzar's life, it is for his own good and for the good of others.

Despite the criticisms made, God is not in continual state of anger.

Nine times the Old Testament says that God is "slow to anger"; eight of those times are followed by the phrase, "abounding [or rich] in love."
The Old Testament also reassures us that God will not remain angry forever.

Unfortunately, it's possible that preachers from passed times have reinforced the idea of a perpetually angry God.

Finally,
Is God a control freak?

One of the themes of Daniel is that God is sovereign and it's found explicitly in the chapter – that He rules over all the nations, kingdoms, government of the earth and history.
We read, Heaven – the abode of God – rules and God does whatever he pleases.

How God does this and to what extent is to enter into a debate that has raged on for centuries.
Some advocate for a God who exercises intimate rule even down to the smallest atom.
Others would say that for people to make genuine choices then God has to relinquish at least some power.
And there are all sorts of views in between.

What the critics are responding too by accusing of being a control freak is the idea there is a God who had authority over their lives.
Many people don't want there to be a God for this reason.

Where I'm up to is this: however it works, God has given human being say-so in creation.
God has given us all 'say-so'.

We see this worked out in our world at the moment.

When you look at Ukraine, we can ask, "Where is God in this?"
Yet we all knew for weeks and months what was coming.

In the Ukraine human beings were given say-so.

And yet the message of Scripture it that the Most High will have the ultimate say over the destiny of this planet.

> "His dominion is an eternal dominion;
> his kingdom endures from generation to generation."

That is good news!
God is not arrogant and self-seeking but humbled himself to bring about our salvation – "everything he does is right and all his ways are just."
He jealously desires your best.

What the critics miss it this: the Christian faith seed God the Most High most clearly in… Jesus.

We read this in our passage from Hebrews.
When we look at Jesus we see the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's character.

If we want to know what God is truly like, we look at Jesus.
Jesus is the tangible embodiment of who God is.
Jesus is the visible manifestation of the invisible God.
God's nature and character is expressed perfectly in Jesus.

And then in Matthew's Gospel it's like the veil is lifted an insight into his heart.

In the four Gospels given to us – of the eighty-nine chapters that make up Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – there is only there's only one place where Jesus tells us about his very own heart.

What does he say?
Jesus says "I am gentle and humble of heart".

The heart is more than just the emotions – in the Bible it is the centre of who we are.
It includes but encompasses more than our emotions.
Our heart is what defines and directs us.

"I am gentle..."

He is gentle, tender, compassionate.
He is not harsh or unsympathetic.
He's not reactionary.
The posture most natural to him is not the pointed finger but open arms.
Jesus is the most understanding person in the universe.

"I am humble…"
Jesus is also humble of heart.
He is lowly.
It's means to stoop, to become low.
He is accessible.
He is approachable.

This is who Jesus is. This is who God is.
Open. Welcoming. Accommodating. Understanding. Willing.

Here's the thing: what Jesus says about own heart is also the heart of God.
When visions of harsh God loom in our minds – Jesus says "I am gentle and humble of heart."

When we've sinned and blown it and feel unforgivable, Jesus says, "I am gentle and humble of heart".

When the heavens seem like bronze and God seems a thousand miles away, Jesus says, "I am gentle and humble of heart".

And what's the invitation – "Come. Come to me… and you'll find rest for your soul."