Jeremiah the prophet told the king who lived in Jerusalem that the king would lose the war that he was fighting and that many of his people would be captured and taken off to live in a foreign land as prisoners. Everything that Jeremiah had said would happen, happened. Daniel was a young man the first time that Jerusalem was attacked. It was the third year of King Jehoiakim's reign, and King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came with his army and surrounded the city. He took charge of the city and overpowered the king. He took gold plates, cups and jugs from the temple – things which were precious because they were used in worship – and he carried them back to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also took some of the most educated and talented young men back with him. His plan was to educate them at the palace in Babylon until they started to think like Babylonians, then he could send them back to Israel, to rule over it for him. Israel would be just a tiny place in the Babylonian empire and it would gradually lose its own language and ideas. Daniel was chosen to go to Babylon to be educated.

The first thing that happened was that Daniel was given a new name. Daniel is a Jewish name, so his teachers at the Babylonian palace gave him a Babylonian name: he was no longer Daniel, but Belteshazzar. He still thought of himself as Daniel, however, so that is what we will call him. Daniel and the others were given food from the royal table. It was rich and wonderful food, the best in the land, but it was not prepared according to Jewish food laws, so Daniel and his friends did not want to eat it. They managed to persuade the man in charge of their food to give them just vegetables and water instead. The years went by, and Daniel received a Babylonian education. He learnt their language and their maths and their philosophy. He learnt their laws and how they organised their country. But the time to send him back to his homeland never came. The people there had rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, so he had ordered that the city of Jerusalem be destroyed.

Daniel was a wise and faithful servant. He was good at organising things and he could be trusted to work well and honestly. He became a very important person in the land of Babylon. He was known as a wise man who could understand mysteries, and several times he helped the king to understand his dreams. Now the time came when the Babylonian empire was taken over by the Medes and Persians, and Babylon had a new king called Darius. King Darius also gave Daniel a very important job, helping to run the country. Some of the other leaders were jealous and began to plan how they could get Daniel into trouble. They sent spies to try to spot Daniel doing something wrong. The spies came back and said, 'He does not steal money for himself. He never takes a bribe. He is fair to his
workers. He never takes extra time off. Belteshazzar is a good man; you will not catch him doing something wrong.’ So the jealous leaders decided that the only way to catch Daniel would be to catch him in something to do with his God.

The jealous leaders persuaded King Darius to pass a law that no one must pray to any person or any god except the king for 30 days. Anyone caught making illegal prayers was to be killed by being thrown to the lions. The leaders knew that Daniel prayed three times a day without fail. Daniel would go to his room, and open the windows that faced Jerusalem, and pray to God. Sure enough, even when the law had changed, Daniel still went to his room to pray. The leaders reported him immediately, and Daniel was arrested. King Darius was very sad but the law was clear — those caught praying were to be thrown to the lions.

In the evening, Daniel was taken to the pit where the lions were kept. They pushed him in and locked the door. The king whispered, ‘May your God protect you, Belteshazzar.’ Then he sealed the door with wax and pressed a mark into it with his signet ring, so that no one could open the door without breaking the wax seal. In the morning, the king rushed to the lion pit to see what had happened. The seals were still on the door. When the guards unlocked it, Daniel walked out! He was strong and well, with not a scratch or a bruise on him. He said that the lions had been very calm — just sleeping and purring — and they had not attacked him at all.

King Darius sent a decree all through his empire that everyone was to honour the God of Daniel, because Daniel’s God was the living God who had saved Daniel from the power of the lions.

[We hang the symbol of a lion on the tree for Daniel, to remember how God rescued him, but also how he loved to kneel and pray and listen to God, with his windows open towards Jerusalem.]

A moment to wonder

I wonder what Daniel did all night while he was in the lion's den?

A prayer

As green as a healthy tree, the story of God's love keeps growing.
We remember Daniel, who prayed to God even when it was against the law.
We pray for everyone who cannot worship freely because of the law in their country.
Amen.