

SUNDAY 15 DECEMBER 2024 – Advent 3

Zephaniah 3.14-end

(Philippians 4.4-7)

Luke 3.7-18

At this time of the Church's year we get to hear a lot about John the Baptist and today's Gospel reading from Luke is no exception. So today, rather than treat you to my take on the Baptist I decided to preach instead about the prophet Zephaniah and what he represented for the future of Israel and, by extension, what he represents for us today.

Very little is known about the prophet Zephaniah, except that he is described as living in the days of King Josiah of Judah, which dates him roughly to between 640 and 609 BC. This was a time just before the exile to Babylon, which took place in the sixth century BC. King Josiah did (according to the Second Book of Kings) "what was good in the sight of the Lord", in contrast to his two predecessors who did "what was evil in the sight of the Lord". This is therefore the context for the short book of Zephaniah.

The three chapters of his book are in stark contrast to each other: together they describe what has gone wrong among God's people, what God's judgement will be, and how the future will look. The prophet describes how priests and people are indulging in idolatrous worship, an indication of widespread religious apathy. Civil and religious leaders are breaking God's law, and such disregard for genuine religion makes the rich and powerful feel free to oppress the weak and the poor. These wrongs are symptomatic of a universal corruption. Seeing how Zephaniah describes what has been happening reminds me of recent events affecting our own country over the past few years: the treatment of people who

came here on the Empire Windrush, worked for years and paid their taxes, only to be told they were illegal immigrants; the treatment of people who had been infected by contaminated blood and still today have not been fully compensated; the treatment of hundreds of subpostmasters and subpostmistresses, who have been subjected to the most arrogant behaviour by those in authority who were convinced of their own infallibility.

Zephaniah speaks of God's intention to undo the work of Creation by cutting off humanity from it and sweeping away everything people had known and loved (bear in mind this is just before the Exile to Babylon). Chapter 2 is devoted to oracles against the nations – Judah and her neighbours – accusing them of sins similar to those of Judah: arrogance, pride, and an almost blasphemous self-confidence. God has a Day when both the proud and the mighty of the people of God will be judged together with those of other nations – in other words, the Israelites are in danger of being regarded by God as no more special than anyone else.

But Zephaniah, like most of the other Hebrew prophets, does not see human sin and God's judgement of it as God's last word. The humble and poor who have been on the receiving end of oppression by the powerful will be delivered. In fact both the oppressive nations and the rich and strong in Judah itself are all lumped together as the enemies whom God will defeat when the people of God are rescued.

Neither human power nor wealth will enable the mighty to escape God's action. God will purify the humble so that they are able to reflect God's divine righteousness, and then all Creation will reflect the character of God, who will reign over the whole world from Jerusalem. So you could say that the prophecy of Zephaniah is therefore not only religious but also political, because we are talking here about corporate values as well as individual ones.

All this is of more than passing interest to us, living in the world of today where sins of arrogance, greed, pride, war and blasphemous self-confidence are just as evident as they were two and a half thousand years ago. Today we see attitudes that convey an impression that we have discovered so much about how the world began and how it functions, that God has frankly been relegated to insignificance. This overlooks, but not necessarily intentionally, the fact that the more we know about the world in which we live should enable us to marvel at and appreciate all the more God's goodness towards us, who are his human creatures, made in his image and likeness.

There is of course the final word of God through the mouth of Zephaniah, and we have heard that word this morning in verses 14-20 of Chapter 3, described as a Song of Joy. In verse 8 of the same chapter we read the words "therefore wait for me, says the Lord, for the day when I arise as a witness", and in verse 9 the words "at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord". The Syrians have had to wait over fifty years for their moment of joy, which has been really heart-breaking to listen to on the news. Four hundred years does seem rather a long time for the Jews to wait, but then something does happen which is announced in such a dramatic form by the one we call John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, which brings us back to the Gospel reading for today.

In the most spectacular of God's actions to be found anywhere in the Bible, apart from the events of Easter, Jesus Christ is born on what could be called the Day of the Lord. God's purpose is about to be revealed to us in his own Son's life and teaching, and then in his death and resurrection. Human life and activity are still far from perfect, as we all individually know, but the difference for us is that we have had recorded several Gospel accounts of God's intended way of living for us, which have been further interpreted by Paul and other writers. So we can with confidence

put our trust in God that he, with our help, will eventually root out all evil from Creation, as we wait once more for his arrival at Christmas and, more importantly, in the hearts of each and every one of us. Many of you were present for the evening Advent celebration two weeks ago, and will perhaps remember the words of Jean Danielou (slightly abbreviated): “We live always during Advent. Just as Christ was born according to the flesh in Bethlehem of Judah, so must he be born according to the spirit in each of our souls”.

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