

Advent 3

Zephaniah 3 v14-20

Rejoice because God has come to us in Christ

Reflection

Prophets prepare the way,

They scan the horizon,

They interpret the signs,

They warn

They announce,

They guide.

At Advent we listen to the prophets in the Bible because they have an important message.

What might they be saying to us today?

Zephaniah calls out. some 600 years before Jesus calls out to his people.

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart - v14

Why?

God has taken away your punishment

And He has turned back your enemy

The Lord God is with You

Never will you fear any harm.

The Mighty Warrior who saves.

But what does this God think about us?

He delights in you

He saves you.

He loves you

He rejoices over you with singing

He will remove everything that's negative from your community

He will deal with everything that oppresses you.

He will rescue the lame – the weak and vulnerable.

And what about those who are lost?

He will gather the exiles

He will exalt the exiled

He will honour and praise them

What is our future?

He will restore your fortunes.

This truly is a wonderful passage that points us to Christ.

Zephaniah encourages his people to *sing, daughter of Zion, shout aloud Israel, and be glad and rejoice with all your heart! V14*

On this third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday that we light the candle of Joy, we do so hearing those magnificent words resounding and reminding us that we have a God who is with us and who wants to bless us with exceedingly great joy.

Yes, we are living in the darkest of times. We are again entering another phase of this corona virus and we might be feeling tired and weary and we may well ask, *how long O lord, where is this going?*

We might feel down and feel that we are being oppressed and being attacked and literally we are in a war, not with guns and bombs, but with a mysterious, invisible attacker, which strikes fear and compassion at the heart of our communities and like the Israelites of old, who continually faced the threat of invasion from stronger forces, from disease and illness, and they too went through periods of great negativity, where their own people became so negative about everything, we have it in verse 18, God says "I will remove from you all who mourn the loss of your appointed festivals which is a burden and reproach for you." Yes, for them because of their situation, festivals had been cancelled and the negative voices were bringing the people down and God said, enough, I will remove these voices.

This is a passage where God wants us to lift up our heads and catch something of the bigger picture. Something of the reality of the situation, the truth is that something greater is happening, than the threat of fear, disillusionment and struggle and that was the presence of the Almighty God.

Like a foggy day, the clouds were over Israel but Zephaniah has come and said, *the sun is still shining, it's behind the clouds and it's only a matter of time until it will break through and shine upon you!*

This is of course, a message for us.

This points to God's grace and his mercy.

It reminds us that He has taken away our punishment and turned back the enemy. This points to the cross and on the cross our punishment was laid on Christ. He has become for us the mediator, the reconciler, the One who has paid the price and taken our sins. Our sin has been dealt with and that is what they are reminded of and that is why they can sing with joy. This is a great reminder for us also this morning, that we have been reconciled with God and above all things Christmas is a time when we remember that we are the daughter of Zion, that we are his family and his children.

So today, in the midst of the darkness, a light is shining and that is the Christ who is the light of the world and who has given us the hope of eternal life.

You may be going through a real time of trial today. You may wonder where or how am I going to cope? Who will support me? Who can I turn to?

In this passage we are given great comfort and hope for there is One mighty warrior, who is greater than us, who is with us this morning and that is the King of Israel, he is the Mighty Warrior God, who comes to fight our cause, and to sit in our corner, and to give us hope and peace in the midst of the storm.

This is faith at work.

Right now, we need to dig deep and discover again the seeds of faith, that have been planted deep in our soul over many years. It's now, more than ever, that we need to trust that God is with us.

I suppose the ancient Israelites, who first read this passage, may well have questioned, who is this God? How does he come to me?

Then suddenly a picture of God like this, opens up their minds.

This is a God who comes to love, heal and to gather people in.

Zephaniah is talking about a rescue mission, he comes to rescue the injured, those who are sick, those who are lame and blind, the weak and the marginalised.

Yes, we know who this God is? Don't we?

This is Jesus, the Messiah, the One who rescues and gathers the lost, the One who cares for the outsiders, the one who has a heart to bring in the lost sheep, the lost Son, and to bring them home and give them honour and praise.

This is a wonderful vision and it comes to fruition, through the One born in a stable, the One who when he became a man reached out to the exile, and the lost, and weary, and the weak.

And he still reaches out! He has reached out to us and He is reaching out today. We need him today. We need him in our hearts and in our souls. We need his Spirit in the midst of our darkness to lead us forward and so when we receive him, we have joy because he comes to us in Christ.

Luke 3 v 7-18

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire 3 v16

John the Baptist is uncompromising, to say the least! No one accuses him of being ambiguous – his words were spoken with directness and clarity. He was not a preacher who fudged his words or said nice things to nice people, so that there would be no reaction.

John steps into the pages of the New Testament, like a prophet from the Old, and so he is like a trumpet sounding loud and clear to all who listen. He does not use pretty words but words that would sting their hearts, he addresses them as *You brood of vipers!*

I have a book on my shelf, how to begin sermons, and I'm pretty sure that this line of attack would not be acceptable. Say something that they like to hear, tickle their imagination, give them a nice story, but John goes for the jugular, *You brood of vipers!*

In politics today who do you listen to, those who tell you all is well, or those who bring some realism into the situation? John is certainly in this camp. But he was living in very uncertain times, but with a great expectation that things were about to change and indeed they did!

For on the scene he announces that One is coming who is greater than him. One whose sandals he is not worthy to tie. This person who emerges from the shadows of John will have a distinctive ministry, he will bring a baptism of the Holy Spirit and Fire.

So John declares that he is not the Messiah, but the Messiah is about to come and he will be much different from John.

What does John mean?

The Holy Spirit, of course, is no-one less than God Himself. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God and this Spirit was to come like a fire.

We know that a fire can be uncontrollable, and there is that sense that what is about to begin will spread, and so it did. What began with one man, and then twelve, and then after his 3-year ministry began a revolution in the world, changing people's hearts and minds. A fire that would burn away the dross and refine people's hearts and spirits. A fire that would not go out, like the burning bush and begin to transform the world.

Of course it is not finished yet, but the transformation over these 2000 years caused by the Christian faith stands testimony to the life of Jesus Christ.

Today in this third Sunday of Advent, we are reminded of joy and the joy that comes through serving Christ. Joy is at the heart of our Christian ministry, because it was at the heart of Christ's. Joy is what we are about as Christians, bringing joy into people's hearts. It begins with a flicker, a candle of hope and it spreads, joy is contagious and like a fire it will spread.

So on this Sunday of Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, are we contagious with joy? Are we spreading our joy or our gloom? You see the choice is ours, but if we have Christ in our hearts we will have no option but to go forward and be joyful people. The Apostle encouraged his church to *rejoice in the Lord and again I say rejoice*; when we rejoice we are transformed people who become the good news.

I lost a good friend this week. Louise died on Thursday with an aneurism. God suddenly took her home. When I reflect on her life, the word joy comes to me. She loved Jesus, she loved people, she spread his joy to others. She never spoke badly of anyone, and all she wanted was for others to experience Christ's joy in their lives. It's a privilege when you know someone like this, and it's a shattering blow when they are called out of your life.

Go forward this Christmas with the Holy Spirit in your lives, and let it burn like a fire, so that others might be touched by God's grace, love and joy in you.

Amen.