Sermon for 3rd Advent Year C

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18

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Zephaniah is not a name we hear very often in Church, so it’s worth just looking at where he fits in the history of the OT and his fellow prophets.

Zephaniah was a much more important figure in his time than he is for us today. He was the first prophet to speak out following a quiet period after Isaiah of Jerusalem had helped King Hezekiah find the faith to repent in sack cloth and ashes and save Jerusalem from the Assyrian empire in 701BC. Sennacherib had fled back home leaving 100,000 troops dead around the besieged city through some outbreak of disease, believed by the Jews to be due to the visitation of the angel of the Lord.

Zephaniah comes on the scene perhaps 60 or 70 years later. The reprieve Hezekiah had won was squandered by Judah’s king Manasseh (687-642BC) and his son, Amon (642-640BC). During their reign they had shown little interest in upholding the faith of Abraham and allowed Judah to drift slowly into the grip of the Assyrians, who though defeated in 701BC, after Hezekiah’s death exerted their colonial power upon a compliant Judah.

In 640BC the boy-king, Josiah, came to the throne. Zephaniah seems to have arisen in this early part of Josiah’s reign, complaining bitterly about the state of the nation and the consequences of its weak and corrupt religion.

It was probably Zephaniah who blazed the trail for the young teenager, Jeremiah, to commence his prophetic calling at about the same time. Jeremiah completely dominates this period of history and we have little left of Zephaniah’s work, but the passage we read today needs to be understood within its context otherwise we’ll get Zephaniah completely wrong.

Today’s passage is a prophetic hymn in praise of the future redemption of Judah when all the many wrongs will be righted, when God will return to Jerusalem, bringing tidings of great joy to the people. This fits alongside Jeremiah’s prophecy of a New Covenant which will one day in the future be written upon the people’s renewed hearts.

If we had read the earlier part of that same third chapter of Zephaniah, we would have heard his excoriations against a doomed, corrupt Jerusalem, against its greedy officials, treacherous prophets and self-serving priests. We could easily have thought we were listening to Jeremiah in his more familiar oracles of doom against Judah. Or we might even have thought we were listening to John the Baptist who says similar sorts of things again some 600 years later.

Between Zephaniah and John the Baptist there have been both good times and bad times. The most immediate response to Zephaniah and to the young Jeremiah had been the Great Reform of King Josiah in 622BC. The religious festivals had been re-instated in Jerusalem and worship of foreign gods proscribed. But it didn’t last long.

In the intervening centuries, the punishment foretold by Zephaniah and Jeremiah had been meted out by the Babylonians and resulted in the 70 year Exile. The Persians, after defeating the Babylonians, had allowed their vassal state, Judah, to rebuild its city walls and rebuild its temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah.

After Alexander the Great conquered Darius the Persian, the Greeks had dominated Judah. These had been bad times for the faith of Abraham, especially under the Seleucids governing from Syria.

Good times had returned briefly after the revolt against the Greeks in the 160s BC; Judah had a measure of freedom again, but was riven with internal squabbles between the competing members of the royal family of the Maccabean and then Hasmonean dynasties. When Rome intervened in 63BC to bring peace to the region it had only done so under the iron fist of the Herodian dynasty.

So when John the Baptist proclaimed it was time to get ready for the Messiah’s arrival, he had a very mixed response.

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They had certainly travelled a long way out of Jerusalem to hear John preach. Perhaps John needed that distance for his own safety, but when they arrived he still gave them both barrels.

After a quiet period without a prophet arising for several centuries, John appeared. He dressed like an old-time prophet; he sounded like an old-time prophet. He ate like an old-time prophet. It was as if Elijah himself had returned from the grave. But who on this occasion would be the equivalents of Naboth - and who the equivalent of Ahab or Jezebel?

“You snakes!” “You brood of vipers!” Who precisely does John have in mind? Matthew 3:7 says the Sadducees and Pharisees were being addressed by these words. Luke, however, has them addressed to the whole crowd. Whilst it is more comfortable for us to see the Sadducees and Pharisees as the targets, let us this year stay with Luke’s version.

Luke suggests that John intended to say that the whole of society has become corrupt and ill-prepared for what God is about to do. The dynasty, the nation, their faith, all is at risk, for the axe has been laid at the root of the tree. Unless the whole nation turns around it will be lost.

John starts with the rich – those rich enough to afford two tunics when the majority of the population would own just the one. This is such an uncomfortable word to us today who have so much wealth compared to those days. Which one of us has only the one coat, let alone the one TV, or car, or even house?

Riches dull the spirit. When we have so much in this world to look after, defend, or enjoy – it naturally takes our time, attention and thirst away from the eternal, spiritual things of God. I wish it weren’t true. I enjoy the worldly wealth that makes my life so comfortable, interesting and rewarding. But we know Jesus spoke about the dangers of storing up our treasures here on earth, the foolishness of building ever bigger barns without an eye on the meaning of our mortal life, of the difficulty of getting a camel through the eye of a needle.

Many Christians have renounced great wealth in order to follow Christ; the most famous example of all being St. Francis of Assisi. Yet clearly we cannot all do that and still produce the wealth that keeps us fed, clothed, housed, educated, defended, usefully employed, entertained, healed and medicated. We have also seen that a religious life dedicated to poverty and chastity can so easily slip into a life of hypocrisy and pride.

There has never been an easy answer to worldly wealth. It is something we need to function as a civilisation and yet it can also destroy us, as individuals or as whole societies. The best advice I can proffer is very modest, but it is this: remember that your wealth has a part to play in the common good and remember that all your worldly wealth is just that – worldly – and of no abiding value whatever to your soul.

Tax collectors then have to take one to the chin, earning a special mention. Yet we could justifiably widen the scope to include all parts of the machinery of state. Tax collectors were as notoriously corrupt in John’s day as top bankers are overpaid today. These words should be taken as a warning to all those who wield political, commercial or pecuniary power. Do not use that power to extort more than you should. You are dealing with a God who casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; people of power and tax collectors who cheat and soldiers who extort from unarmed civilians be warned, says John, they need to refrain from greed and treat the world with justice – for it is to God himself that you shall answer.

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What is the response to all this? Well, John makes a few enemies as you would expect – chiefly among the powerful and wealthy as you might imagine. The Sadducees and the Pharisees have good reason to resent him for undermining their positions in society. But it is when John criticizes King Herod Antipas for his marriage to his half-brother’s ex-wife that John finally takes on more than he can manage.

The majority of ordinary citizens, however, thought John was right. Their hopes grew that perhaps John himself might be the Messiah. John, however, pointed to someone who would follow him with even greater things to show and say.

Luke says that in such ways John preached the Good News. It wasn’t all Good News and it certainly wasn’t to those who refused to change their ways. It still isn’t Good News for people who refuse to listen.

Yet it was Good News to those who had little stake in this world, those who were pushed out to the margins of affluence, those who counted for little in this world. It was Good News to those who renounced the human impulse to hoard the treasures of this earthly life and search for the treasures that still have value in heaven.

For the One whom John would point out as the Lamb of God, he was born not with great wealth and political power in a palace; his kingdom would rely on no exploitative taxation; he would lead no avenging army to turn their world upside down. The One whom John proclaimed was born in a stable, announced to poor shepherds and disclosed to foreign priests, leading an army of fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, soldiers and children. Their one great weapon was the power of their changed hearts and their one battle cry the cry of love and peace to the world.

As you hear again the challenging words of John the Baptist, you must ask yourself if you have sufficiently heeded his warnings. Have you really turned away from the preoccupations of our modern, comfortable secular times? Have you truly prepared yourself to hear and receive what the Christ is about to declare? If not, it doesn’t matter how much shopping you have done, how many gifts you have wrapped, or how many cards you have sent.

Unless you are ready in your heart for Christmas, you are not ready at all.

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