

Sunday 12 December 2021
St. Margaret's & Holy Trinity – Holy Communion
Advent 3

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

What shall we do?

As you can see from the number of flames on our Advent ring, we are now well into this season of waiting and hoping, and looking forward and preparing.

Today we see most of that through our passage from Zephaniah together with the customary second appearance of John the Baptist.

I imagine that you would probably agree that the book of Zephaniah is not, on the whole, cheerful reading. Almost everything about it is disputed by the scholars and theological experts. No one seems to be absolutely certain when it was written and no one is quite sure just how much it has been edited and patched together from various different sources.

Indeed, the beautiful verses set for today's reading are so uncharacteristic of the rest of the book that they are generally thought to have been a later editor's attempt to give a happy ending to an otherwise totally gloomy book. Certainly, it all moves from an outright condemnation of Jerusalem through to dire warnings to most of the neighbouring states, but finishing with today's sudden passage that could easily have come straight out of Isaiah.

But, even if this passage has been added later, I think I can detect a certain logic to it. What was it the prophet told Israel?...

Be glad and rejoice...
The Lord has taken away your punishment...
He has turned back your enemy...
Never again will you fear any harm...
The Lord your God is with you...
He is mighty to save...
He will quiet you with his love...

At the very end, God has chosen to come and live with his people in Jerusalem and his presence with them makes it their home.

The word "home" is an emotive one wouldn't you say? Think of all the things that have been done throughout history in the name of protecting this idea of 'home'. To think of 'home' and 'Jerusalem' in the same breath is almost unbearably ironic just at present.

Who has the right to call Jerusalem 'home'?

Whatever you may think of the current politics surrounding that thought, Zephaniah had no doubt that Jerusalem can only be called 'home' when God is there himself.

So, home - not so much where the heart is, as where God is.

I suppose for us then, the trick is to train our hearts to feel only at home where God is. Just as St Augustine wrote...

"Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee".

This is why I think that this is such an appropriate reading for Advent.

Because, it is God's willingness to be homeless to bring us home that we celebrate every Christmas, and that we spend Advent trying to imagine and prepare ourselves for.

What then might we say about the Gospel passage from Luke? Well, just like Zephaniah, Luke warns us that dispossession is the only real preparation for possession.

Here we find John the Baptist warning his hearers, in no uncertain terms, that they have placed their faith in the wrong things. They are trusting to the fact that they are Abraham's children to get them into God's home. Or, even more deceitfully, they have actually demonstrated that their security lies in having two coats, more than enough food and money or the strength to make others do what they want them to do. They have clearly made their home where they are comfortable and secure.

Amazingly, John doesn't fall into his own trap. He is strikingly successful, and the people come to him, asking advice, and speculating about who he is, even wondering if he is the 'Messiah'. The temptation to believe in his own centrality to God's work must have been enormous. But John is clear that he is no more than a 'voice crying out in the wilderness', and that he will only succeed in what he has been sent to do once he becomes redundant.

But as I think about John the Baptist in a modern context I am staggered that he managed to pull it off at all. He clearly wasn't working with the benefit of a modern PR consultant or a skilled press officer. All our contemporary arts of flattery, every subtle and not so subtle attempt to butter up the listeners and tell them how deserving and excellent they are, seem to have completely passed him by. "You brood of vipers" is hardly a promising opening. But after the initial harangue, which would have given most political campaign managers nightmares, comes the most direct, sound and practical advice. John doesn't wrap his listeners in comfy layers of cotton-wool spirituality, but he goes straight for their wardrobes, their food stores and their wallets.

John's listeners got it right.

They didn't ask,

"What shall we say?" or

"What shall we think?" or

"What shall we believe?" or

"How should we feel?"

They asked, "What shall we do?"

One of my favourite questions is:

If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

In other words, is the way you live your life day by day decidedly different from the rest of the world?

It almost feels like, in order to reach Jesus, you first have to get past John the Baptist! John stands in the way. He is almost the buffer stopping us approaching God's kingdom on our own personal terms. John's call is unequivocal. He calls us to prepare and to repent - precisely what this Advent season is all about.

"What shall we do?"

That's what the people asked John so long ago.

Ultimately, it's a question we can only answer for ourselves.

Amen.