

### **Zephaniah 3:14-20**

Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

<sup>15</sup>The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.

The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.

<sup>16</sup>On that day they will say to Jerusalem, 'Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.

<sup>17</sup>The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.'

I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you.

<sup>19</sup>At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles.

I will give them praise and honour in every land where they have suffered shame.

<sup>20</sup>At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honour and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,' says the Lord.

**The season of advent** traditionally looks forward to the end of things, and to Jesus's second coming. It is a time of penitence, sobriety and prayer, in preparation for the Lord's return. The four last things — death, judgement, heaven and hell are the subjects for our meditation during this time. This serious subject matter contrasts greatly with the tendency we can have of making Christmas cosy and safe — away in a manger, peace on earth.

Our Old Testament reading comes from Zephaniah, a prophet from the time of King Josiah, who reigned in Judah just before the Babylonian exile and who endeavoured to bring reform to Judah, to bring the nation back into line with God's will and God's way. Josiah's efforts were ultimately futile — bad ways and polytheism were too ingrained in his people — and he himself came to a bad end engaging in a battle that God had not asked him to fight. In line, then, with Josiah's efforts at reforming his people, Zephaniah begins with the most dismal of prophecies against Judah.

'I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away both men and animals... The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth.'

There's plenty more of that sort of stuff in Zephaniah's three chapters. It is apocalyptic, in the colloquial understanding. Having announced this destruction, Zephaniah goes on to judge the neighbouring nations. You're no better he says, Moab and Philistia. You too are corrupted, and cannot stand. While pronouncing this judgement, he goes on to judge Israel with the others. It is as if Israel has strayed so far that they are no longer recognisable as God's people. And while Zephaniah probably knows that it is the Babylonians who will wreak this destruction, he does not name them — he emphasises that this is according to the Lord's will. The Lord wants his people to understand that foolishness and evil have really significant consequences. God is gracious, and good, but, God also wants his people to understand that — as my Sarah puts it — if you play stupid games you win stupid prizes. You can't expect to live a bad life and have a good outcome. There are consequences.

Our reading is then a very dramatic contrast with the two preceding chapters. It really should start a few verses earlier, from verse 9 of chapter 3, in which the Lord promises to purify the lips of the peoples, that they all may call on the name of the Lord. He promises to get rid of the sinful so that only the meek and humble are left.

And then, in the section we read, we hear that 'the Lord has taken away your punishment'; 'he is with you'; 'he is mighty to save'; 'He will take great delight in you'; 'he will quiet you with his love.' 'He will deal with all those who oppressed.' 'He will rescue the lame.' He will gather the scattered'; 'he will bring you home'. He will restore your fortunes before your very eyes.'

The impact of this is somewhat like the last ten minutes of 'It's a wonderful life'. Everything that has gone wrong is sorted out. Relationships are made whole. The Henry Potters of the world have been dispatched, the George Baileys vindicated and there's just huge love. Just as every image of joy possible is loaded into 'It's a wonderful life', so is it loaded into the final portion of Zephaniah.

We can read Zephaniah and see Jesus present but unnamed everywhere. Healing the lame? Jesus does that. God in the midst of the people? That's Jesus. Gathering all nations? Jesus again. Vindicating the oppressed — Jesus through and through.

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called 'Gaudete Sunday'. Gaudete is Latin for Rejoice! It's an easing of the fast in the midst of Advent. It's relief from the self-examination and penitence of a traditional Advent that looks to the coming joy. So while the gospel contains John the Baptist's memorably severe warnings, Philippians takes up the joyful song. 'Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I say rejoice!' 'The Lord is near. Don't be anxious!' 'The peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.'

In Zephaniah's writings, bad news gives way to good news, judgement gives way to love, brokenness gives way to gathering and unity. And this is our experience too — the reflection and prayer of advent give way to rejoicing, love, humility and generosity. As we look forward to Christmas, so we look forward to the final wonderful, joyful unity of Christ's second coming. Amen.

*Join us for our Singing Carols*

*in the Church*

*with Mulled Wine & Nibbles*

*Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup>*

*5pm*

*Everyone is Very Welcome*

