

12 December 2021; Advent 3

Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Philippians 4: 4-7;

Luke 3: 7-18

1. Contrasting readings

At first sight, our two readings sound very different. The tone of the first is upbeat: 'Rejoice! Do not worry!' The gospel reading, by contrast, contains warnings of God's wrath and of hell fire. Yet both speak of the coming of the Lord. The passage about John the Baptist ends by stating 'with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people' Taken alone, the words we heard don't sound like **good news**. John, who we think of today, is uncompromising. Living in Spartan conditions in the desert, he sees so clearly what is wrong with the world of his day, and particularly the social injustices, committed not only by the occupying forces, but also by the religious leaders who should know better. People ask him what they should do, and he tells them clearly. They must repent and change their ways.

From the letter to the Philippians too we are told that 'The Lord is near'. But this does sound rather more like good news.

Importantly, the emphasis here is not on what his readers must do, but on **what God will do for them**. 'God's peace, which passes all understanding, **will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**'

2. Preparation

With those who flocked to hear the charismatic preaching of John, we too ask today 'what then should we do?' How do we prepare, in this Advent season, for the coming of Jesus at Christmas. Is this preparation about practical activity, or about waiting on God? I want to suggest it is not either/ or but both/and.

At the start of our communion service, each week we say together something called the 'Prayer of Preparation'. You might like to turn back to it now, on p6 of the red booklets. This used to be called the Collect for Purity in Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer. Its history goes back even further to the 8th Century and is attributed to St Gregory. It goes like this: 'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit (*that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, thro' Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*').

In that prayer, we recognise and declare that all about us is known to God and we ask to be purified and worthy to be in the presence of God. Now, whilst we do indeed believe that our hearts are open to God - we are an 'open book' to God, we may not be such an 'open book' to ourselves. Not because we

are engaging in some sort of cover up or self-deception (although there may be elements of that), but because our personal histories and memories carry many incidents that continue to affect us now – sometimes even trouble us a lot and haunt us. And it takes time, confidence and effort to open our hearts **to ourselves** – to identify what we really long for.

3. Advent promises

Advent is a time of promise, of hope and of looking forward. It is also an opportunity to ask ourselves what we really long for. There are promises – both for the world, and for individuals.

In relation to the social order, we are told that the coming of this king will turn the world order upside down. The vision of ‘levelling up’ is not just 21st century political jargon: it runs throughout the visions of the prophets, and is even found in the song of Mary, which we consider next Sunday. In our Advent course, we gave some thought this past week to what this might mean today in face of so much inequality, in face of refugees who have nothing and the Christmas crowds spending so much money.

And as individuals too, God’s coming into the world brings a promises of salvation: how do we understand that in personal terms? Might it involve being freed from some of those things

that hold us back, which we often bury under our own internal carpets, not revealing them to ourselves, despite the fact that they are known to God?

In these days of Advent, it is good to try to identify what it is that we really long for? Is it simply a longing for COVID to be over so that we can throw off our face masks and return to ‘normal’? Or are we open to change – ready to change our own ways and some of our habits of thinking? If so, we do not have to do all the work ourselves, for we are promised that God will work in us to help us. ‘Cleanse our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit’, we pray each week. ‘And the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds’, says Paul to the Philippians. Yes, there are practical things that we may be able to do to seek to make this world more like the Kingdom of God. Like those who questioned John the Baptist, we need to examine our own lives and behaviours, but we also need to make time and space for God to enter our hearts and minds and show us his vision.

It is so easy **not** to hear the promises and warnings of Advent: to skip this season of preparation and rush on to Christmas celebrations whatever form they may take. But if we do that, we are in danger once again of Christmas being a time that

comes and then goes in a flurry of activity, when we have not even seriously considered what it might really mean for us, and even for the world. In a moment we come to the commemoration of Jesus and his disciples sharing bread and wine around the meal table. It is into the intimacy of that occasion that we are invited, to be nurtured by God and by each other. We come knowing that our hearts are open to God, and today we come with a prayer asking that God will give us both insight and his peace, which passes all understanding. **Amen**