

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2021  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent - Year C

Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Psalm - Song of Isaiah  
Philippians 4:4-7  
Luke 3:7-18

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

I saw a great little cartoon through the week. It portrayed a character who was obviously John the Baptist - dressed in a rough hair shirt, with long beard and wild eyes - and the speech bubble said: "Merry Christmas... you brood of vipers!!!!"

And it occurred to me just how much this season of Advent is actually about our being able to hold in tension the message of the Prophets, like John the Baptist in today's Gospel, with the overwhelming sense of promise that is the destination at the end of the journey on which we are travelling throughout Advent - that is, Bethlehem, and the Manger.

And that is perhaps even more stark on this third Sunday of Advent, as we light the candle of Joy, yet are reminded of the warning voices of the Prophets, bringing God's word on the ways in which we are to live.

The context for the writings of Zephaniah, our first lesson, was that the preceding kings of Judah, Amon and Mannaseh had led God's people astray, encouraging the worship of the pagan gods, Baal and Astarte. The new King, Josiah, was trying to turn the people away from this, and Zephaniah was his most zealous champion in this regard.

In his proclamation to the people, he warns them about the coming "Day of the Lord", when the judgment of the Lord would descend on Judah and Jerusalem as a punishment for the corruption that existed in religious life. But, yet again, comes the message that if the people will return to God, then blessings will flow.

And today's passage is one of hope, as Zephaniah promises that "The Lord, your God, is in your midst; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."

This is the promise that awaits God's people, even in the midst of the sufferings that they endure.

And the Gospel, which begins with such alarm - "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance." actually then goes on to give some practical instruction on how one is to live a life worthy of salvation. Share your gifts - your coat; your food. Do not extort money. Do not collect more tax than is due to you.

It is worthwhile for us to remember that in every case, when the Prophet speaks; when God's words are spoken, it comes from a place of love. If God did not care for God's people, then there would be no need to bring these warning words. To put it quite bluntly, if you don't care about someone, truly love them, then it doesn't actually matter what happens to them, does it?

But with God, who cares so deeply for us, the natural thing is to call people back from their wandering. So, Zephaniah and John are in the same league. They bring a warning to a people who have lost their way.

In this Advent season we are reminded of the sense of hope and joy that overshadows everything, if only we will have eyes to see it.

The other night I had the pleasure of enjoying the St. Andrew's School Board Christmas dinner; a very pleasant evening with my fellow Board members and the leadership team of the school after another busy and productive year. As I chatted with people through the night, what stuck me was this.

There was not one person there who was not carrying burdens and concerns in their lives - an ageing parent struggling with loss of independence; a significant health concern; a child with challenging behaviours; fears about job security amidst cuts to the workforce; the sadness of missing family interstate and overseas over the past 2 years.

In our lives, there is always a mixture of joys and challenges. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the stories of those who we seek to support through our use of the Christmas Bowl and ABM envelopes. I'd like to share with you the story of just one person who has been helped by the organization, Act for Peace - who run the Christmas Bowl appeal. It's the story of Daniyel.

Daniyel was a young man when he and his parents fled the conflict in Sri Lanka for a refugee camp in India. More than a decade later, he was still in the camp, with a wife and four children of his own. But without the freedoms of a citizen, Daniyel often struggled to feed his family. When his oldest daughter fell sick with a heart condition, life became even harder.

Thankfully, Daniyel was assisted by Act for Peace, who helped Daniyel's family obtain the correct documentation such as birth certificates for their children and make citizenship applications. On returning to Sri Lanka they helped them access government services such as health care. They also supported Daniyel to build a business to support his family.

Daniyel remembers how it felt to be back on Sri Lankan soil after 12 long years away, as he used these words, *"I experienced boundless joy. First, meeting my parents and other relatives, then returning to our own house in our own country."*

Boundless joy. As we light the pink candle on our Advent Wreath today, our hearts and minds turn to the joy ahead of us. But as we do so, we are conscious of the path that lies on the way - a path that is in so many ways winding and full of pot-holes and barriers.

The Advent joy does not dismiss these challenges, nor does it seek to downplay the knowledge that we constantly fall short of God's ways and our own standards and expectations as we live. But in God's infinite patience and mercy and grace we have another chance, another opportunity to move forward, however falteringly, towards our goal.

St. Paul writes to the early Christian community in Philippi, commending the ministry of two women in particular in the community, and says to them "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." This fledgling group of Christians had any number of challenges and concerns, as they faced persecution and ridicule, and as the Jewish converts faced exclusion from the Temple which had been their whole life. Yet Paul exhorts them to do good to one another, to care for one another, and to continue in prayer to God.

On this Third Sunday in Advent, let us take seriously the call to joy - not a sweet and dainty joy, which is fleeting in nature, but a deep and serious joy, which sustains us and carries us through all our lives, drawing us forward, on the path that God has for us.

In the name of God. Amen.