

ADVENT 3C 12-12-2021 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Zephaniah 3.14-20; Song of Isaiah (APBA p391); Philippians 4.4-7;

Luke 3. 7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.' And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.' As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Don't be fooled by today's text from Zephaniah! It looks positive (because it is) but it is actually the hopeful epilogue to a remarkable prophetic rant. Zephaniah is calling out his home city of Jerusalem during the time of King Josiah. They have departed from the covenant, and they are set on the path to destruction.

A quick read of Zephaniah makes John the Baptist look much less aggressive. But Zephaniah and John are in the same league. They bring a warning to a people who have lost their way.

Just prior to today's reading from Zephaniah, God promises to abolish haughtiness and leave only a people who are humble and lowly. These people will do no wrong and they will not lie, and no one will make them afraid. We are still waiting for that promised day, even though in Christ we have a foretaste of its powerful beauty.

So in Zephaniah, the Lord promises to bring the exiled Israelites home; the Song of Isaiah sings and shouts for joy, praising God; and the Apostle Paul invites us to rejoice in the Lord always, because God will set our hearts and minds in peace.

Interestingly, none of the people to whom any of these words were originally written were as comfortably well-off as we are, or well off at all. They were living in a foreign land where they had been taken as slaves or were struggling to survive under Roman occupation.

Of course, they had never heard of Christmas either, so they weren't expecting holidays and fabulous food and extravagant presents. They were mostly subsistence farmers, peasants, day-labourers, fisherfolk or slaves.

The words of Isaiah, Zephaniah, and Paul are words of comfort and reassurance that God will make things right, so we all can sing and praise and rejoice.

Then along comes John the Baptiser, shouting abuse at the people who had trekked out to the wilderness to listen and be baptised by him. That's not very pastoral, is it? Imagine if I introduced a baptism service by yelling at the baby's family and friends, "You brood of vipers!" I think we might receive a few complaints.

Why do we hear this during Advent? It isn't very Christmassy, is it? We want to hear about babies and shepherds and angels, not a weird hairy angry man raving and carrying on. We might be forgiven for thinking, "I didn't come here to be told off! I can stay at home for that!"

Mind you, the people on the receiving end of John's tirade didn't take offence but stayed around to ask him things. Three times he was asked, "What should we do?", first by the crowd in general, then the tax collectors and then the soldiers.

Those people were clearly impressed by what John said and wanted to be right with God- which is what repentance means. John prepared people for the coming of Christ, and we need to learn from him if we also are to prepare for Christ.

As one commentator has written, "There is no getting to Bethlehem and the sweet baby in the manger without first hearing the rough prophet in the wilderness call us to repentance."

John calls for careful self-examination and recommitment, and we are called to reprioritise and return to lives focussed on the love of God and of our neighbour.

What should we do? Make unselfish choices, live within our means, do what is just. John didn't tell people to give away everything they had, but to share from their excess- however you define that. He told them to be fair and honest, not greedy, and concerned for the needy.

Churches do this well at this time of year; we collect food and gifts for disadvantaged children and distribute them to people in need.

Generous people of this parish have donated almost \$400 to Roseworth Primary School and nearly \$600 to Balga Senior High School. This will help to provide Christmas hampers for needy families.

We can easily sympathise with families and individuals who are unable to enjoy Christmas because of poverty, loneliness, illness, or grief.

Repentance and preparing for Jesus is about more than generous sharing, important as that is. Repentance is a mental and spiritual u-turn, it is humble obedience as a natural result of meeting with God and accepting the truth of the Gospel.

Repentance is not just confessing our sins, although that might be a necessary part; it is a whole-of-life change that should be obvious to others.

When John baptised people, he warned them to understand the demands placed on them once they had been cleansed and renewed and changed forever. That's what baptism does: and our part is to **live** it.

Can anyone tell, by observing our lives, that we bear the mark of Christ and are living as his faithful disciples? One person put it this way: if being Christian was outlawed, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

What counts is your life and how you live it- what you do during all the other hours when you're not at Church. Throughout Scripture God has called people to repent, and Zephaniah, Isaiah and John the Baptist followed the long line of prophets through whom God spoke.

That call is just as relevant today. We are called to turn away from consumerism and towards God; away from self-sufficiency and towards relying on God; away from self-centredness and towards others.

We are called back to our baptismal promises as we prepare for the coming of the Lord, so let us get ready!

The Lord be with you.