Sermon preached by Dr Alan Rickard on 12th November 2021

Readings: Luke 3: 7-18; Zephaniah 3: 14-21

In this, the third Sunday of Advent, I will explore the theme of joy in the midst of repentance and preparation.

Advent in the early Christian church was originally a 40-day period of fasting in expectation of, and preparation for, the feast of Christmas. It was reduced in the ninth century to four weeks, and hence we have the four Sundays of Advent. Today, being the third Sunday, we have re-lit two purple candles on the Advent wreath followed by the third, pink candle for the first time. These colours are symbolically significant. Purple is the penitential colour of fasting and preparation, and is also used in the equivalent season of Lent; the period of fasting and preparation for Easter. Note that purple is the colour of the pulpit fall we use for Advent. Last week we heard earlier in Luke's Gospel of the coming of the word of God to John the Baptist. In his ministry to the people around the River Jordan, John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, evoking the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'prepare the way of the Lord'. So the recurring themes of Advent, as signified by purple, are those of repentance and preparation for Christ's coming.

Today, known traditionally as *Gaudete* Sunday, clergy in other traditions are allowed to wear rose-coloured vestments to emphasise the joy that Christmas is near. The rose, or pink colour of the candle is also representative of this joy and gladness in the promised redemption. *Gaudete* Sunday has a parallel in *Laetare* Sunday in Lent. The descriptor 'Gaudete' is the Latin for the first word of the Entrance Antiphon taken from Philippians 4: 4 - 5, translated as 'Rejoice'. We have already heard these words sung in the well-known setting by Henry Purcell: Rejoice in the Lord alway! Today's reading from Zephaniah, in the Hebrew scriptures, is entitled "A Song of Joy'. The third Sunday of Advent, therefore, reminds us of the joy that is to come and serves as a break amid this season of repentance and preparation.

The third candle is also known as the Shepherds' candle, the first two being the Prophets' candle and the Bethlehem candle. Shepherds' candle refers to the shepherds in the fields, watching over their flocks by night, and their joy at finding the Christ Child. Plain, ordinary folk who did what they had to do to provide for themselves and their families. We share their humanity at this time and in their rejoicing.

Let us turn now to the Old Testament reading and what it has to say to us today. The book of Zephaniah the prophet, according to the scholarship of Rex Mason, enables us 'to see and hear something of the people of faith across many years, who found inspiration in the message of a particular prophet and sought, in a living and creative way, to apply that message to the signs and events of their own changing times and circumstances.'

The opening sentences of the book give us a genealogy of Zephaniah that is unique in its length for a prophet, and sets the time of his prophetic activity in the reign of Josiah, King of Judah, that is from 640 to 609 BCE.

The words of Zephaniah to the faithful of seventh century BCE Judah, who were appalled at what they saw, and oppressed because of what they suffered, have become here a kind of charter of hope and faith for the oppressed and rejected of that age and indeed of any age.

As with some other prophets, there is a call for repentance in the hope that the threat of God's judgment upon his own people might be averted.

Some scholars have found apocalyptic elements in his work, that is, a belief that God will break into this world's history, from outside and beyond it, to set up a quite new age in which the world will return to its former condition when God first created it.

Rex Mason goes on to say that the book of Zephaniah witnesses to the kingdom of God as powerfully as any other in the Old Testament. It is one of the most politically, socially and religiously radical of the prophetic books. It is anti-establishment to a degree that would make a liberation theology of it quite understandable. It is not a call to the political path of revolution, but it is nevertheless revolutionary. It passes sentences of death on the oppressive kingdoms of this world and witnesses to the ultimate truth that they will become the kingdoms of God. It is therefore a call to faith and endurance on the part of the oppressed. As Mason has it: 'Who is to say, however, that (their) patient, quiet witness to the ultimate victory of justice does not have as explosive a final effect as the bloodier path of revolution.'

However, we are faced with the problem similar to other prophetic books in the Old Testament: how can we tell which were the words of the original prophet and what has been added to them? Ehud ben Zvi, the eminent Canadian Hebrew scholar, on the one hand, on literary grounds, maintains that at the centre of this book is the word of Yahweh, not of Zephaniah. Pictures we are given of a prophet are of an idealised figure who delivers sophisticated speeches and calls for repentance. Many other scholars, on the other hand, think that the whole book is authentic, apart from one small section, and C. A. Keller dates the prophet, from the religious and political circumstances, to about 625 BCE, so matching the reign of Josiah.

Whoever he was and whenever he lived, tradition sees Zephaniah, like other Old Testament prophets, as a universal figure who went on speaking to each successive generation, and the book reflects this belief. Do read it for yourselves this Advent season.

In Zephaniah 3: 14 - 20 we are exhorted to rejoice with the people of Israel. For we shall fear disaster no more and God will remove disaster from us and restore our fortunes before our very eyes. In these days of the Covid-19 pandemic, and, as I write, the emergence of the omicron virus variant in Cambridgeshire and its spread nationally, may these words speak to us across the millennia as they surely did to the people of Judah in the seventh century before Christ.

Likewise Paul, in his letter to the people of Philippi, an ancient city located in modern day Greece, encourages us to rejoice in the Lord. Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Roman Catholic theologian draws a helpful distinction between happiness and joy. Happiness is dependent on external conditions, whereas joy can be present even in the midst of sadness. Joy is 'the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war or even death - can take that love away.'

Do not therefore worry about anything, but bring your concerns to God in prayer and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And so, finally, to today's Gospel reading that Jane unpacked in the Sharing Together. Luke continues his account of John the Baptist. John instructs us, according to verse 8, to bear fruits worthy of repentance in order to receive God's forgiveness. He is not the Messiah, unworthy as he perceives himself. Whereas John baptises with water, the one who is coming will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And as for the chaff, winnowed out of the air, it will be burned with unquenchable fire.

Thus we end today's journey through the lectionary readings with the elemental symbolism of earth, water, wind and fire. From the *terra firma* that is the homeland of Zephaniah in ninth century BC Judah, through the first century AD of John the Baptist baptising with water in the River Jordan and of Paul writing to the Philippians in ancient Greece, to us in twenty-first century Cambridge.

May we take time out of this busy run-up to Christmas to reflect on our own worthiness to seek repentance and, with God's help, prepare for the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ as that babe in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.