

“A WORD FROM THE PROPHET – NAHUM”

Nahum 1:1-15

I wonder how many of you have ever read this little book of Nahum? Or how many of you know which two books it comes between? I suspect there might be rather more of you who ask yourselves the question, “What’s the point?” I don’t mean what’s the point of knowing where Nahum is to be found, nor even “What’s the point of Nahum?” I mean, what’s the point of being a Christian. Maybe some of you who help with the children’s and the youth work particularly sometimes wonder what on earth you’re doing and why!

I’m sure if we are all honest, there are times when we have thought – for many of us, times when we still think – “What’s the point of all this Christianity stuff? I try to do what I think God wants of me. I try to live my life in accordance with what the Bible teaches. But look at all these people round me who don’t give two hoots about God or what he wants, and they seem to be getting on so much better than I am.” It doesn’t seem fair, does it? The people who ignore or reject God are richer, better provided for, have more fun and generally seem to be doing alright despite God’s warnings about how we should be living our lives. We’ll all die in the end, anyway.

It’s a theme we find voiced in many of the Psalms. Look, for example, at those words from *Psalms 37*, which we read earlier on this morning. Or at the words of the prophet Jeremiah in *Jeremiah 12:1*:

*You are always righteous, Lord,
when I bring a case before you.
Yet I would speak with you about your justice:
why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all the faithless live at ease?*

Or, to be a bit more contemporary, and looking at it from the other side, the words of Billy Joel’s song *Only The Good Die Young*. With a Catholic girl particularly in mind, he sings,

*They showed you a statue and told you to pray
They built you a temple and they locked you away
But they never told you the price that you’d pay
Only the good die young ...
They say there’s a heaven for those who will wait
Some say it’s better but I say it ain’t
I’d rather laugh with the sinners than die with the saints
Sinners are much more fun.*

And it’s a theme that is very much behind the words of the prophet Nahum, whose little book we are looking at this week as part of our studies in these Minor Prophets, these short, rather obscure, books towards the end of the Old Testament.

We don't know very much at all about the prophet himself. He was called Nahum, which means in Hebrew "Consolation" or "Comfort", and he came from Elkosh. Since no-one has any idea where Elkosh was and many people think Nahum was actually just a pen-name, there's not really very much to go on if you're trying to write a biography of the man. What we can work out, though, is that he was preaching to the people of Judah and this book seems to have been compiled sometime around 620BC to 612BC.

Now, you may, with some justification, say "So what?" Well, if that date is correct it means that the people of Judah were still living in the afterglow of Josiah's reforms, enjoying the fruits of a powerful spiritual revival that took place when the young king Josiah took to the throne. Indeed, if you read through this book, you'll find no words of criticism for God's own people. The prophecy is directed against Nineveh, the city where Jonah had preached not long before, as we touched on when we looked at his little prophecy a couple of weeks ago. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire and Assyria was effectively the superpower of its day. They had conquered territory as far south as Egypt and most of what we now call the Middle East was under their control.

The Assyrians were a particularly bloodthirsty people, quite unaffected by any thoughts of morality or clemency. They worshipped a number of gods and goddesses in whose name they committed the most unspeakable acts (some of which you'll find spoken of in commentaries, if you're really interested). Their huge wealth had been amassed through pillage, corruption and treachery. At various times they had invaded Israel and Judah and their intervention had been interpreted by some of the prophets as God's retribution on his people for their unfaithfulness. It's quite possible, then, that the people of Judah were beginning to think that there wasn't a great deal of point in continuing with Josiah's spiritual reforms, because those nasty Assyrians didn't and they seemed to be doing very nicely, thank you.

Then Nahum turns up with this explosive condemnation of Nineveh. We need to see it in terms of a prophecy against Washington or Beijing – or even London – today. Assyria had oppressed Judah and many of the surrounding countries: they may have seemed impregnable and economically invincible, but they were to be destroyed for their appalling record. In 3:1-4 (in some of the finest biblical poetry outside the Psalms), Nahum denounces them for their crimes – violence and ruthless military power, corruption and unscrupulous commerce and false religion which includes idolatry and witchcraft.

As we look around us today, we see that such things are still very much a part of the life of our world. The only difference is that we have become far more "sophisticated" in all those areas. The chariots have been replaced by fighter planes and helicopters, the flashing swords and glittering spears by the nuclear warhead and the SCUD missile. We may not hear the presenter of *The Financial World Tonight* or the

editor of *The Financial Times* describe the bloated economies of the west as “*the wanton lust of a harlot*”, but there is no denying that’s exactly what it is. The horoscopes, cults and various idolatries of our western lifestyle may not seem as crude as the statues and idols of the Assyrians, but they are no less “*sorceries and witchcraft*”. We do not sacrifice our children on the altar of the god Moloch: we sacrifice them on the altar of sexual fantasy, or murder them before birth if they look like being inconvenient.

What is the point of sticking to our Christian principles when we see all this going on around us, but God doesn’t seem to be doing anything? He’s told us that all this is wrong, but there’s nothing happening – they’re all getting away with it. In the words of another piano-playing singer-songwriter who hasn’t done much worth listening to since the 1970s, Elton John, “*If there’s a God in heaven, what’s he waiting for?*”

Well, Nahum’s prophecy against Nineveh was fulfilled and the city was totally destroyed – that huge city which repented after Jonah’s preaching but then went back to its former ways. It was annihilated to the extent that today there is absolutely no trace of it other than a large mound of earth, known locally as “The mound of many sheep”. That once great city, with all its commerce, all its military might, all its culture, has been wiped off the face of the earth! And that was done by the God whom Nahum describes in *1:2-8*. Those verses are addressed to no-one in particular – the NIV has added the name of Nineveh in *v8* (and *2:1* – that’s what the square brackets are for) because there was nothing in the original manuscript and it seems natural to assume, in the light of *1:1* that Nineveh is the object of all that, and is probably being used to represent all Assyria in the same way that we talk of “Washington” to refer to the economic and military might of the USA. It sounds scary stuff, doesn’t it? But let’s look at what Nahum tells us about the God in whom we put our trust.

1. GOD IS SLOW TO ANGER

It can seem very unjust to us that God doesn’t just wipe the ungodly, the Great Unwashed, off the face of the earth. Why doesn’t he just remind them of his word and then, if they don’t respond, slay the lot of them? Well, there are some fairly hefty questions about our own complicity in the industrial-military machine that is western society and quite how we would fare if God decided to do that, but we’ll leave those this morning as they come up in most of the other Minor Prophets, so we’ll have other opportunities to consider them. But just think, those of you who didn’t commit your lives to Christ the very first time you heard about him in Sunday School or wherever – where would you be now if you hadn’t responded after a couple of warnings? You may well have cause to be grateful that God is slow to anger.

In *1 Timothy 2:4* we read that God wants all men and women to be saved (“*God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*”). And in *2 Peter 3:9* (“*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish,*

but everyone to come to repentance”), it is made very clear that God wants everyone to have a good chance of repenting. We may think, from our own fairly limited perspective, that some people have had plenty of time to sort themselves out, but looked at from God’s perspective of centuries and millennia, he is prepared to wait, to be patient, so that no-one is denied the opportunity of turning to him if they want to. He doesn’t simply lose his temper and blow them away: he waits patiently so that they have a chance to listen to him and respond.

2. GOD IS GREAT IN POWER

Now, there may be some people who say that God doesn’t do anything because he can’t. It’s not a question of his being patient, but of his being impotent, unable to carry out his threats. Nahum knocks that idea on the head and goes on in *1:4-6* to describe some of the ways in which God can demonstrate his power. Just because God holds back on his anger, just because he is patient, that doesn’t mean that there’s no power there.

Just think of a powerful lioness carrying her young in her jaws without leaving so much as a mark. Some of you may remember my talking about a colleague when I was teaching who was a mountain of a man. He taught PE and played top-flight rugby (and, sadly, died suddenly in his 40s). He taught in such a way that every kid felt special – even the ones who could hardly move were treated with great patience and kindness. But on the occasions when he decided to show his strength, he was awesome. No-one could stand up to him. We learned never to respond when he took his teeth out and said, “Hold these a minute.” God is gentle and patient, but also awesomely powerful – they are in no way incompatible qualities.

3. GOD IS JUST

He doesn’t stay patient for ever, though. Eventually he has to keep his word. If he has said that the guilty will be punished, then he must keep his word or his credibility – indeed, his very essence as the God of all truth – will be compromised. Those of you who are teachers or parents will know that if you threaten to do something and then don’t do it, the kids will really take you for a ride next time. You hope against hope that the threat will work, because you don’t want to have to carry it out, but if they don’t respond, then you have to do it. So time runs out in the end, and even for the inhabitants of Nineveh, who had had the opportunity under the preaching of Jonah to repent of their sins, the time finally came. God’s terrible power was unleashed as invading armies and natural phenomena combined to wipe them from the face of the earth.

Yes, God is patient and he does want to give men and women as much opportunity as possible to repent, but when the time finally comes, that’s it! *Hebrews 9:27* reminds us that it is our destiny to die and then to face God’s judgement (*“people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”*). We cannot

escape that fact. It is unthinkable that we should ignore the idea that God is a God of love and compassion who wants all men and women to be saved. But none of that makes any sense at all unless there is a dimension of judgement and wrath – otherwise, what is there to be saved from and for? Justice is a two-sided coin, with love on one side and judgement on the other. One makes no sense without the other, really.

4. GOD IS GOOD

That little statement in v7 is irrefutable. God is the very embodiment of goodness – he is perfection itself. What more can we say? Everything else that we say about God is summed up in those three little words, and his goodness is far beyond anything that we could hope to emulate.

5. GOD IS PROTECTIVE AND CARING

God's goodness is not only "negative" in that he doesn't get angry too quickly. It is also "positive" in that he actively seeks to help us. In situations where we have our backs to the wall, he is a refuge, someone to turn to and be sure of receiving help from. But notice that Nahum adds a little phrase here – *"he cares for those **who trust in him**"*.

God can help in all kinds of ways, but we need actually to trust him, actively to seek his help. Now we are beginning to see that there is something in this Christianity business after all. However well other people seem to be doing without acknowledging God, however well we think that we can get on without him, there is always that element of uncertainty that is present in our lives. The Assyrians thought they were invincible because of their military and economic might, but in the tortuous alliances of the Middle East there came a time when they too were overthrown. Those around us may seem secure in their materialism and consumerism, but what happens when a recession suddenly arrives. It may seem fun to be sleeping round, but then you have to cope with a sexually transmitted disease. It may be great finding your kicks in alcohol or drugs, but then dependency creeps in and your life is ruined.

Now, such things are dangers for us all, I know, but if all your eggs are in one of those baskets, you've lost the lot. If we're trusting in God rather than possessions or temporary kicks or whatever, he can see us through those difficulties. He does care, he does protect – and although it can seem difficult at the time, we can see that he never ultimately lets us down.

6. GOD IS THOROUGH IN JUDGEMENT

Here's the other side of the coin again! God cares for those who trust in him, who show their love for him and live by his rules. But those who don't will be *"pursued into darkness."* The description of the fall of Nineveh in the next two chapters is graphic and chilling – and it happened.

However you approach the teaching about what happens after this life and the teaching on hell, there is plenty of evidence in the New Testament that there is something pretty awful in store for those who choose to ignore God and live their lives according to their own ideas. When we finally stand before God at the end of our lives here on earth, God will not sentence us to a set time cut off from him, with time off for good behaviour. It is for eternity if we haven't got ourselves right with him. But through Jesus Christ, whose sacrificial death we remember and give thanks for – and regularly commemorate in the bread and wine of communion – he has provided a way out. Through belief and trust in what Jesus did for us on the cross, we can know – we can be completely sure – that we will avoid the kind of punishment that came upon the Assyrians or is spoken of in the New Testament.

God's justice is complete and wholly trustworthy. Not only will he protect those whom he recognises as his own, those who have decided to trust in him, but he will also destroy all that has been tainted by evil, including those whose lives have been lived without a second thought for their Creator and Redeemer – not because he hates them, but because he has promised to deal with sin and evil and has to keep his word. Let's remember with Nahum that those who set themselves up against God will reap the consequences. And as we praise God for his love and goodness, let us also thank God from the bottom of our hearts that those who put their trust in him need never be afraid.

A WORD FROM THE PROPHET - NAHUM
Nahum 1:1-15

“What’s the point of being a Christian? Everyone else seems to get on pretty well without bothering. In fact, many of them seem to do better than I do.” We’re all tempted to say that at some point, and it’s a theme we hear voiced in some of the *Psalms*. It also lies behind the words of the prophet Nahum.

We know very little about this prophet. His name means “Consolation” and he came from Elkosh (v1). As no-one knows where Elkosh was, and there’s a possibility that Nahum was a pseudonym, we don’t have a great deal else to go on! We can work out, though, that he was preaching to the people of Judah some time around 620 – 612 B.C. At that time the people of Judah were still living in the afterglow of Josiah’s reforms, enjoying the fruit of spiritual revival – there are no words of criticism for them here. The prophecy is directed against Nineveh, where Jonah had previously preached. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the superpower of the day. It’s quite possible that the people of Judah were wondering why they should keep obeying God when Assyria didn’t – and seemed to be doing very well. Nahum’s prophecy denounces the Assyrians and their appalling violence and idolatry (3:1-4). The prophecy was later fulfilled and nothing remains of Nineveh. The God whom Nahum describes in 1:2-8 acts in judgement on a nation and on a city that has clearly contravened his laws. What Nahum says here helps us to see a little more clearly what kind of God we trust.

God is slow to anger (v3). Why doesn’t God simply wipe the ungodly from the face of the earth? Because he wants to give them a chance to respond. Look at *1 Timothy 2:4* or *2 Peter 3:9*.

God is great in power (v3). Some people see God’s patience as impotence – he is actually unable to do anything about evil. In vv4-6 Nahum gives us a glimpse of God’s mighty power. Just because he is patient and caring does not mean that he has no power.

God is just (v3b). Eventually God will keep his word. Time runs out for the people of Nineveh. *Hebrews 9:27* reminds us that it is our destiny to die and face God’s judgement. If we are to be saved, we are to be saved *from* something.

God is good (v7). God is the very embodiment of goodness; perfection itself. His goodness is far beyond anything we could hope to emulate and embraces his patience and his justice.

God is protective and caring (v7b). God’s goodness is not only “negative” in that he doesn’t get angry too quickly. It is also “positive” in that he actively seeks to help us. He never lets us down – and he gives us real hope for the future.

God is thorough in judgement (v8). In the end, God will utterly destroy evil and all those who are tainted by it. The Assyrians were obliterated because they opposed God and his people.

Questions for discussion

1. Why are you a Christian? Do you ever feel tempted to give it all up because it doesn’t seem worth it?
2. “*If there’s a God in heaven, what’s he waiting for?*” (Elton John) How do you respond to that?
3. God says through his prophet “*The LORD is good*” – but then he would, wouldn’t he? Where’s the evidence that God is good?
4. How should we respond to all this “Old Testament talk” about wrath and judgement in the light of Jesus and the New Testament?