

“A WORD FROM THE PROPHET – ZEPHANIAH”

Zephaniah 3:1-20

One of the things we’ve noted about these Minor Prophets – the little books towards the end of the Old Testament – is that the prophets who first preached them were so minor as to be pretty well anonymous. We know very little about any of them, which means we can concentrate on their message rather than their life stories, and hear what God has to say through them without all kinds of background analysis of their formative influences and motives for preaching. However, this morning’s Minor Prophet is one about who we know just a little bit more.

Zephaniah’s prophecy begins with a very short genealogy and from it we can see that he was a high-born member of the court, descended from Hezekiah, one of the kings of Judah, so he would have been well-connected and probably quite well known. And we are told as well that he was preaching during the reign of Josiah. This would have been early in Josiah’s reign, before he started the religious reforms which we mentioned a couple of weeks ago. Josiah followed the kings Manasseh and Amon, who were amongst the most decadent and corrupt kings of Judah and who had led the country far away from the Law of Moses and from the values of justice and righteousness which God had intended for his people. At the time Zephaniah was preaching the nation was still a mess of apostasy, idolatry and greed, and he would have been in his early twenties, a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum and perhaps Habakkuk, speaking God’s words of judgement to a people who had wandered far away from their spiritual and religious heritage.

And much of this little book is just what you’d expect from a prophet. If you read through the first couple of chapters and the first part of the chapter we’ve just heard, you can imagine the words being spoken by some kind of wide-eyed, heavily bearded demagogue, to whom most people would give a very wide berth indeed. There’s talk of sin and punishment, uncompromising attacks on the people who were ignoring God’s words, powerful language of rebuke and condemnation.

Zephaniah takes the people to task for their **religious syncretism** (1:5) – their adopting of other aspects of pagan worship such as worshipping the stars and following other gods. They are absorbing elements of other religions into their own worship of God and that leads before long to their turning away from God completely (1:6) and ignoring him. It’s made all the more obvious by their adoption of the whole culture that goes with such idolatrous worship – the **wearing of foreign clothing** (1:8) and **odd superstitions** (1:9a). That particular practice refers back to an event that took place in the time of Samuel (1 Samuel 5:5). The underlying attitudes of the people have become **violence and deceit** (1:9b). Following other gods always has consequences beyond the actual worship that goes on.

And, as we've said several times already on our tour through these little books, you can see that such things are not confined to the seventh century BC. Even today there are those who mix up the worship of the One True God with all kinds of other weird and wonderful stuff drawn from other religions and philosophies – the New Age movement is just one expression of that. The condemnation of foreign clothing doesn't mean that God's people can no longer buy stuff that's designed or made in France or the USA, but that we need to beware of the values we are exhibiting by, for example, the slogans on our t-shirts and the overt sexuality of the way we dress. It goes without saying that violence and deceit are on all sides – the current interest in corruption in the world of football bears that out – but should not be allowed to affect the way we live as those who claim to follow God.

That's all fair enough, I suppose. You expect your prophets to try and open your eyes to the things that are wrong in your culture, community or congregation. And you expect, too, the prophet to tell you what's going to happen to those who persist in their godless behaviours and attitudes. Zephaniah tells his listeners about the coming Day of the Lord, as do his contemporaries. *"The great day of the LORD is near"* he tells them in *1:14*. Throughout the Bible – Old Testament and New – this "Day of the Lord" is the time when God's going to sort it all out, when the righteous will get their vindication and the wicked will finally have to pay for their sins. It's not going to be a comfortable time for those who have not mended their ways. According to Zephaniah it will be *"a day of wrath ... distress and anguish ... trouble and gloom ... clouds and blackness"*. Those who stand against God will have to deal with the consequences of that rebellion.

Now, some would say that we shouldn't take all this too seriously. It's just hyperbolic language. You can't believe that a God of love would do this kind of thing. It's more to do with the vindictiveness of the prophets and the holier-than-thou God-botherers. There's no place for this kind of talk in the loving religion of Jesus. The trouble is, the kind of people who say that also keep asking why the world's in the state it's in and why doesn't God do something. Well, this is what he will do! This is how he will deal with injustice, unrighteousness, rebellion and disobedience. This is how he will deal with the people who are causing the problems we want sorted out. This is what he has promised and warned about since the very beginning of time. This is what he has given people an opportunity to avoid. Fanatical and frightening as these prophets appear to be, what they are doing is warning people that if they don't get themselves right with God, this is what will happen. Get on and change your ways while you've got the chance! God does care about the mess we've made of his world. He does care about those who have been exploited and oppressed and disadvantaged by the sin of others and he wants to put it right. Reckoning and judgement will be meted out. If his Kingdom is to be established then the rubbish has to be disposed of.

So chapter 2 is all about the judgement that is to fall on those nations that have opposed God's people. There are oracles against the Philistines, against Moab and Ammon, against Cush down in north-west Africa and against the current baddies, Assyria. Doom and destruction are prophesied for them. These peoples who have over the years invaded, deported, destroyed and besieged God's people will themselves be destroyed – ruined, plundered, razed to the ground. So far, so good, Zephaniah's listeners would have thought: that's just the way it should be. Punish the enemies of God's people and show them who's Boss.

But then they hear Zephaniah go on into the words we heard just now – chapter 3 in our Bibles today. This is all about Jerusalem, about God's own people. They are not going to escape God's coming purge, because of their rebellion (3:1) and their own profanities. For too long they have taken God for granted and assumed they can do what they want. They cannot point the finger at the Philistines and Moabites when they're just as bad themselves. It's a bit like all those Christians today who get up in arms about the awful things that are going on around them, but get sucked into adopting those attitudes and living that kind of lifestyle themselves.

This chapter 3 is all good, proper prophet stuff, isn't it? Zephaniah rails against apostasy – against turning to other gods – and challenges their unbelief, their unrighteousness, their injustice. These people of Jerusalem turn a blind eye to what's going on amongst them. They gradually find themselves behaving in the same way. They live for themselves and not for God. They have stopped worshipping, praying, living for the God who has done so much for them and now live for themselves – deceitfully and violently. Such people will not escape the coming judgement. This is the kind of stuff you expect from your prophets – denunciation and gloom! And it is so predictable, it conforms so closely to the template that it gets ignored, swept aside, put into perspective – “Oh, it's just little Zephaniah sounding off again” – and the people continue as they have been doing. Just like today.

But then the picture changes in the second part of this final chapter. In 3:14-20 we hear another aspect of the same message. The coming of “The Day of the Lord” means that God is going to set everything to rights again. He is preparing to restore his good creation to its original state, to get things back to how he wanted them to be before sin and evil got in and made such a mess, to establish his Kingdom, his sovereignty once again. If that's going to happen, evil has to be dealt with – it must be eradicated and anything tainted with it destroyed. The things which don't accord with God's good purposes must be swept away so that those good purposes can be realised. Those who take seriously what God is doing and who want to be a part of that will find themselves spared the destruction. And for those who want to follow God's ways, 3:17 is the key verse. It's an amazing verse after all that has gone before in this little book and sums up the whole message of the Bible – in both the short-term and eternal perspective – God is with you, not against you. You are loved by him and he really does want the best for you.

“He is mighty to save.” In the short term, for the people to whom Zephaniah was preaching, this would have assured them that God wanted to save them from marauding enemies. That’s what was at the forefront of their minds. For centuries they had been invaded, overrun and pillaged by their stronger neighbours. But God was going to put a stop to that. But in the longer term, God was powerful enough to save them from the effects, the consequences of sin – their own sins and the sins of others. Look back to *3:15a* where he tells the people that he has *“taken away their punishment and turned back their enemy”*.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see from our perspective that this is looking forward to Jesus. This is generally reckoned to be a messianic passage, looking forward to the Kingdom of God – *vv19,20* capture something of that – and what will be achieved when the Messiah is finally revealed. God will bring his people home. We will be back where we belong, safe in his arms. The punishment has been taken away by the work of Jesus on the cross. Yes, there will be doom and destruction; yes, evil will be dealt with definitively; yes, that will necessarily be messy and painful – but you can be saved from that by the God who is with you, if you are prepared to accept his love and commit to follow his ways.

And God wants that to happen. This has always been a part of his plan. **“He will take great delight in you.”** You see, God made human beings and placed them in his good creation as objects of his love. He really does love you. The reason stuff goes wrong and we end up wondering if that’s true is because we find ourselves pulled away from God by the forces of evil – the Devil, if you like – who is trying to take his revenge on God for the way in which he has been defeated by him. But God wants you back. He is proud of you, delighting in you like a loving parent or doting grandparent. If you get nothing else out of the Bible, if you get nothing else out the sermons you hear here and elsewhere, if you remember nothing else about Christianity, remember this – God loves you. You matter to him.

And that can have an amazing effect. This next phrase in *3:17* is one which is so succinct, so well put, so memorable. It’s translated in different ways in different versions, but this translation here is just wonderful. **“He will quiet you with his love.”** Those words just breathe calm, peace, assurance in a world of turmoil and anxiety. The people who heard these words of Zephaniah for the first time would have heard about punishment, destruction, international and military uproar. They would have wondered just what on earth it would mean for them. They heard about the fate that lay in store for those who had turned against God. What hope was there for them?

And you may have similar anxieties in a world that is so economically unstable and militarily fragile. There may be things in your own situation that are troubling you, problems that seem insurmountable,

difficulties that lurk round every corner, it seems. Or you may be really anxious about your own eternal future with God and the prospect of things not working out as you'd like them to. Remember this – *“he will quiet you with his love”*. God will help you, because he loves you. If you are prepared to let him, he will bring you that peace that can *“quiet you”*.

You see, I reckon that at the very root of the fears of many, many people is the fear of the eternal future. It's a kind of subconscious, hard-wired aspect of being human. Deep within us is that echo of eternity and that inarticulate realisation that one day we will have to meet our Creator. That can be scary, especially if you've had to listen to the kind of doom-mongering that Zephaniah and his mates appear to be peddling. But if we are prepared to admit that fear before God and trust him to sort it out, we find that the grumbling of problems and punishment is drowned out by words such as, *“The LORD has taken away your punishment”* and *“He will quiet you with his love.”*

God is looking forward to gathering his people to him, to *“bringing his people home”* (3:20). He wants you where you were always supposed to be – from eternity your home has been with God – and through Jesus Christ and his life, death, resurrection and glorification he has made that possible. You have a place in his Kingdom, a place for all eternity, a place that is peaceful, joyful, serene. It's where you were supposed to be. Are you prepared to accept that? Or do you want to risk your eternal future on some other scheme which has no such firm foundation?

*“The Lord your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing.”*

A WORD FROM THE PROPHET – ZEPHANIAH
Zephaniah 3:1-20

As with so many of the prophetic books at the end of the Old Testament, this once again seems to be a catalogue of death and destruction. But there are gems of peace and assurance that shine through the doom for God's people.

Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah, living during the reign of Josiah. He is thought to have been an aristocrat (especially if we take his descent from Hezekiah to be from the King of that name). The oracle was first spoken some time after 640BC, when Josiah ascended the throne of Judah, and before 612BC when Nineveh was destroyed (2:13). Although the reforming King Josiah was now in control, the people had lived through the reigns of two particularly evil kings, Amon and Manasseh. Under their rule, while Judah was an Assyrian vassal state, the spiritual and moral state of God's people had taken an alarming turn for the worse.

In chapter 1, Zephaniah outlines some of the sins which were widespread in the country and for which judgement is soon to fall on the people. They are sins which have their parallels today.

- Syncretistic religion (1:4-6,9a)
- The adoption of foreign culture (1:8)
- Deceit and violence (1:9b)
- Carelessness and complacency (1:12)

After the words of denunciation, the prophet goes on to describe the judgement that is to come on those who turn against God. The prospect seems bleak, but if we read on to the end of this book, we find that there are to be a few faithful people who will escape judgement, and to them the prophet says, "Be glad and rejoice with all your heart" (3:14). It's a sentence that speaks to us still today, especially at the time of year when we celebrate the coming of Jesus into our world. Why should that be? In the next verse (3:15), we read of four specific reasons for rejoicing.

- The Lord has taken away your punishment
- He has turned back your enemy
- The Lord, the King of Israel is with you
- Never again will you fear any harm

They are words that are echoed by Paul in *Romans 8:28,31*. God is on our side and will always protect us so that the eventual outcome will be for our good. There is no need to be afraid, no need to fear any harm. We are indeed God's people, those who believe in him: we are released from punishment, protected from the enemy and kept safe by the presence of God.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways are the sins of Zephaniah's contemporaries evident in our world today?
2. Why do you think the prophecies of destruction in the Old Testament are so graphic and apparently barbaric? What do they say about God?
3. Are we really aware of the possibility of punishment from God? Why/why not? What difference should it make to our lives and our evangelism?
4. In what ways can we know that God is with us?
5. Despite God's promises, we still fear harm. Why?
6. How do you respond to the words of these Old Testament prophets?