



Third Sunday of Advent

16th December 2012

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Psalm - The song of Isaiah [Isaiah 12:2-6], Philippians 4: 4-7, Luke 3:7-18

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

By the third Sunday of Advent we feel as if the whole world is moving toward a celebration of Christmas. The “whole world”, however, is really our own version, and our perception, of the world, and certainly for most of us here, and for those around us, there is a clear movement toward Christmas. There is a lot to do, and there is a busyness that somehow fills the air, and fills the days at this time of year. Homes are being decorated, families are sorting our arrangements, special foods are being ordered and prepared, and cards and presents are being found and made ready for giving.

In all of this busyness the Advent star shines. Starlight is subtle, it does not have the cancerous glare of the midday summer sun. It illuminates, but only if you are looking for its illumination. It is, however, there, and it shines by day and by night. And there is a reflection of the subtle Advent light in the busyness around us. The expectation of Christmas, the very ‘carrying’ of Mary is reflected in the hopes and expectations of children as they come closer to Christmas. The preparations of Magi, again reflected in the selecting of gifts and the careful keeping of them till their anticipated presentation of Christmas day. The “no room at the inn” is voiced by nearly every salesperson in their “sorry we’re sold out”. There is, in the subtle starlight of Advent, just enough illumination for us to see the threads of a common humanity moving toward the holiness of life that Christmas reveals.

One of the strangest preparations for Christmas is now only undertaken by a few odd people. In the midst of the growing Christmas frenzy, a few people pause; and they pause to listen to Zephaniah, to read a few lines from an old letter to the church in ancient Philippi; and then to hear once again the story of an eccentric who came out of the wilderness and promptly insulted all and sundry by calling them “you brood of vipers”.

What are these odd few people doing, and why are they doing it? It can’t be just a habit, for in the busyness of Christmas preparations there is hardly time to indulge one’s habits. Even the TV channels move away from their endless repetition of situation comedy, forensic policing and habitual quiz shows; as they too pause and air their Christmas specials. So if not habit, what are these people doing, stopping to listen to Zephaniah and to hear that strange proclamation of John the Baptist? What is the Christmas special these few people have discovered, or seek to discover?

Perhaps they are the few who notice the subtle starlight; perhaps they seek to more fully apprehend that truth that the world now only faintly echoes. Perhaps they know what Galileo only found by looking through a telescope; another truth that is so easily forgotten in the everyday. The star that shines its subtle light is in truth a sun; and so too the sun that scorches deserts here is a star. And having seen, having looked up from the busyness of their everyday, they pause to engage those other forgotten truths that everyone is busy trying to celebrate. Instead of listening to the echo of Mary in a child’s longing Christmas expectations, they seek to hear the very Word that gave birth to every life.

So now that we have paused in the light of the Advent star what truth do we discover on our way toward Christmas. Zephaniah calls us to rejoice without fear; he saw a truth illuminated in his star lit world, *“the Lord is in your midst”*. And it is a truth which needs us to pause so that we can fully appreciate its reality. Christmas is not the event of “he came to earth from heaven”; rather it is a telling of an often forgotten reality. Christmas recalls us into life’s holiness. Sunlight illuminates but one reality; but starlight offers us another sunlight, and so too another reality; “the Lord is in [y]our midst”.

Zephaniah’s earlier chapters speak of darkness, and yet in today’s reading it is obvious that he saw life in a new light. And living in the light of the Advent star gives us an opportunity to move toward Christmas with an expectation; an expectation that we may bring to birth our Divine reality and to find ourselves at the centre of the nativity scene.

Paul’s letter to the early church re-tells, reflects, the same reality that Zephaniah saw; *“Rejoice... the Lord is near”*. Zephaniah and Paul both saw the truth of Christmas as a worldview, and both chose to live in the light of that reality; not as spectators but rather living life in a new way, a way that was formed and shaped by the reality of Christmas. And that reality is illuminated in both readings:

Rejoice
Fear disaster no more
Do not be afraid
Do not let your hands grow weak
God will rejoice over you with gladness and renew you in Divine love
The lame and outcast shall find praise and renown
The Lord says, I will bring you home.
Rejoice
Let your gentleness be known to everyone.
Do not worry about anything
Prayer, supplication and thanksgiving shall make you known to God
Peace will guard your hearts and minds.

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Are we sometimes so dazzled by the sunlight of the everyday that we are blinded to life’s very longing for itself? Rejoice in the star light of Advent; the same light that brought John the Baptist out of the wilderness. In that new Advent light John saw those around him in a new light, and so named what he saw in a confronting way.

In the apparent rage with which he confronts the crowds around him, in naming them as *“You brood of vipers”*, he is calling them into another reality of themselves. He is inviting them, almost goading them, to see what he believes is already deep within them: the Advent light which is a call to repentance. He goes even further, and calls into question their own religious understanding of who they are; he questions their dependence on their God.

“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.”

In comparing them with “these stones”, he compares the faithful to idols, to lifeless religious statues. However this is not a diminishing criticism, rather it is a confronting call, the same call that Zephaniah and Paul make; a call to each and all of us to realise our Christmas birth. As we pause in the star light of Advent so we open ourselves to the illumination of Christmas

Advent is a time in which we affirm the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” in our life and in the reality of our faith. God is already present with us; and God is also still to come to us. John the Baptist is our orientation to our future, and also a reminder that we prepare the way for every other future.

Today and every day; *The Lord is near.*

And so we might be drawn to ask for ourselves the question asked by the ‘crowds’ in today’s gospel:

"What then should we do?"