**Advent 3 Year C – 12th December 2021**

**First Reading Zephaniah 3:14-18**

The oracles of Zephaniah date around 625 BC, in the reign of Josiah and just before Jeremiah. Like Amos before him, Zephaniah warned his readers of the 'Day of Yahweh,' a universal catastrophe that will sweep away Judah and the nations. The chastisement of the nations, already begun, should be a warning to Judah, but the 'shameless nation' will not take heed.

In fact, Zephaniah is entirely negative, to-day’s passage being the only cheerful part of the whole work. In it, he says that the 'humble and lowly' (3:12 the anawim) will remain faithful and inherit the kingdom of God (compare Matthew 5:3).

Jerusalem is bidden to rejoice because her salvation is at hand. Yahweh himself stands in their midst, the king and protector of his people. Under his leadership the nation will suffer no evil within nor fear any enemy without. There can be no place for 'weak hands' - no place for discouragement. This king, this victorious warrior, is none other than the bridegroom who gives new life to his bride by the very fervour of his love.

Therefore, there is all the more cause for rejoicing. The image of a loving bridegroom, here as elsewhere, tempers the awful majesty of God. For Israel, Yahweh was always personal and close at hand, a God who steadfastly loves his unworthy and unfaithful bride.

You will notice, in the Missal translation, we twice have the words ‘in your midst’ (vv 7 and 12) to describe the presence of God among his people. The Hebrew literally means ‘in your womb’ which could not express the incarnation of God in Christ any more appropriately.

So, as far as we are concerned, the passage is intimately relevant to Christmas. It has notably influenced Luke 1:28-31. Mary is bidden 'Do not fear' as was Zion (Luke 1:30; Zephaniah 3:16). but we should not miss the parallel between Yahweh in the womb of his people and Christ in the womb of his mother.

**Responsorial Psalm: Isaiah 12:2-6**

The song gives thanks for the divine salvation that hid been promised in the Old Testament and is now on the brink of fulfilment. This makes it equally suitable for Advent

**Second Reading Philippians 4:4-7**

This is part of the end of Paul’s letter whose opening passage was read last Sunday. It is in the nature of a postscript, addressing an appeal for unity to specific individuals and is rounded off with some general advice. The central section (vv. 4-7) calls on Christians to rejoice in the Lord, to be free from anxiety and to live in a spirit of prayer and thanksgiving. In this way they will win the peace of God.

The probable reason for its use in Advent is because of the phrase, ‘the Lord is very near’ and the traditional Latin title, Gaudete, (Rejoice) comes from the opening word. This becomes a key-word of the epistle, occurring six times in all. It is a basic condition of a Christian life, for Christians are called to rejoice always. It is a quality of peace and gentleness and kindness flowing from a deep inner conviction of faith. It ought to be a quality of life that the world can recognize as typical of Christianity.

Yet how can we forget that Christians are no less human than ordinary people? We get tired, depressed and bad-tempered like anyone else. When at seminary I remember one evangelical student whose commitment and enthusiasm for the cause could not be greater. Each day, he would rise an hour before dawn to study more of the ‘scriptures’ than anyone else and then worry because he was tired and bad-tempered which no Christian should be. Ironically, he had fallen into the temptation to think that we gain the ear of the Lord by the effort we put into our faith.

More often, however, the world is impatient of Christian weaknesses, attitudes, standards and way of life; Christians have need of patience and understanding. Perhaps, more importantly, forbearance must begin at home. A Christian community will not display to the world an aspect of 'joy' if there is lack of understanding and meanness within itself. If God is generous enough to accept us as we are, then it is gratitude to him if we are able to do the same.

This, I believe to be particularly important in our relations with other denominations of Christians. The non-Christian world sees no difference between us and deduces that we cannot be taken seriously if we cannot agree among ourselves or love each other.

As the Lord comes nearer and nearer, we become more and more excited. Contrast this with Lent which is characterised by growing anxiety while Advent is by growing anticipation. It is a shame that the two seasons are sometimes thought similar.

**Gospel Luke 3:10-18**

This reading consists of two small units represented by the two paragraphs in the Missal. The first (Luke 3:10-14) is John’s preaching to various classes of people: the crowds in general, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. They would most likely be troops of Herod Antipas in whose territory John was preaching and who would be those most in need of repentance in the eyes of everyone else.

The second part is the Baptist's messianic preaching. He disclaims any suggestion that he is the Messiah (see the interpolations in the Johannine prologue 1;1-18). Both Luke and John however, leak the claims of continuing followers of the Baptist; their man, rather than Jesus, was the Messiah.

On this third Sunday in Advent, we listen to the preaching of John Baptist which prepared the ground for that of his cousin, Jesus. To understand the issues, we must remember certain factors.

Luke has already made clear (Luke 1;39-56) John’s subservience to Jesus from before their births. Tradition says that Luke got this material from Jesus’ mother, which is no more than possible.

Secondly the record we have was written by Jesus’ disciples, and not John’s and naturally they all make it explicit that John pointed to Jesus. (John 1;6-8 and 15)

Thirdly, in fact, we also have evidence that John was not so certain that Jesus was the one anyway. (Matthew 11;2-3 & Luke 7;18-23)

The fourth thing that helps to put this in perspective is the meaning of the Greek word, Baptism. It means ‘immersion’ and was used in secular writing of diving and drowning. But it could also be used metaphorically as in Baptism in the Spirit, where it means full and total commitment.

However, the most important symbolic property of Baptism is that it contains within the same action both death and life. So John’s baptism is a washing away of symbolic sin, but his prediction of Jesus’ baptism is that (in Christian eyes) of a totally different league. John’s was a token washing. Jesus’ is life-giving birth.

Luke reports the Baptist warning that the axe of God's judgment already threatens the fruitless tree of Judaism though there is still just time for repentance. But if there is no change of heart the tree will be cut down and cast into the fire: those who fail to grasp this opportunity cannot expect to escape the consequences. (3:7-9).

So, it would not surprise to hear that Jesus was probably not what John had in mind.

Judgement includes condemnation and forgiveness and it is likely that John’s conception of the Messiah was of one whose function would be more the former than the latter. It has been suggested that this is why later on from prison John asked whether Christ was the coming one or whether people were looking for another. Jesus turned out to be a very different kind of Messiah from what John and the establishment and indeed the Twelve had expected.

Mark reports John describing Jesus as ‘baptising with the Holy Spirit’ to which Matthew and Luke both added the fire and the winnowing-fan. These were common images of judgement but it is impossible for us to be certain of which implications that the authors intended us to deduce. In the light of Pentecost they also carry overtones of holiness and purity.

Spirit and fire are united in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of Acts 2:3. Verse 17 shows the Messiah in his role as judge: he will separate grain – the new Israel which he will gather to himself - from chaff.

In general terms, the Baptist had pointed forward to the coming of another, the Strong One ("he who is mightier than I"). Unlike the Baptist, who administers a baptism with water, the Strong One will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.