

St.Aidan's West Epping, 16th December 2018

THE WAY TO PEACE

(Zephaniah 3:14-20; Song of Isaiah; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18)

The season of Advent has a double message, focussing on the coming of Jesus. We prepare to celebrate the first coming of Jesus, as the babe of Bethlehem, and we live in readiness for the second coming of Jesus at the ultimate climax of history.

Our readings this morning reinforce this double emphasis of Advent. The prophet Zephaniah, over 600 years before Jesus, warned of God's coming judgement on disobedient Israel, and on the evil nations round about. But judgement was not the end of the story. Beyond that judgement, there was the promise of something new and wonderful. Our reading from the end of the books speaks of this. The Lord God would again be in his people's midst, and God's wonderful blessing would be experienced. In a special way, the coming of Jesus fulfilled that prophecy. However, that salvation was now not just offered to one nation, but to people of all nations.

In our Gospel reading from Luke 3, John the Baptist also spoke in very dramatic terms of judgement, and of the coming of the Lord. People must be ready for the coming of one whose shoelaces John was not worthy to tie.

And so John called them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. And he made it clear that baptism was not an end in itself: if its significance was not expressed in a new life, a life of justice, godliness and compassion, it was a sham. Judgement was a powerful reality for John. And that judgement was linked with the coming of the promised Messiah. "Be ready!" was John's message. The Messiah will see through hypocrisy and pretence: if you want God's forgiveness, your repentance must be the real thing.

It was a strong message, a very challenging one. And we know that **Jesus** also expressed that message of judgement in many ways: in his preaching, in his warning to those who rejected his message, in his powerful acts, but above all in his death and resurrection for us all.

Jesus' message was not all sweetness and light: judgement was a major issue for him. And when Jesus comes again, judgement will be right at the heart of what happens: for evil must be done away with, and those who

insist on aligning themselves with evil must inevitably be caught up in that judgement. But we need not be afraid of judgement, for God's grace and forgiveness are extended to us through Christ.

And when shall all this happen? Paul says, "The Lord is near." Or in the traditional version, "The Lord is at hand". It is not far off, although no date has been given, and God's view of time is not limited like ours. Those words "the Lord is at hand", come from our reading from Philippians 4. Much of it will be familiar. Those four verses have great things to tell us.

Paul actually wrote these words from prison, not knowing whether he would live or die. But the nearness of the Lord encouraged him throughout his ministry, with its blessings and its challenges, with its joys and its suffering. He knew that the Lord was always near because the Holy Spirit was with him at all times, strengthening him and guiding him and encouraging him.

But he also knew that the Lord was near because he was coming soon, to bring his people home to his glorious kingdom, to bring all things to their true fulfilment, and to put right all that is wrong in this world. Knowing that the Lord is near gave Paul strength to hang in there, to keep going even in tough times, when his message was rejected, when people misunderstood him, when he was physically attacked or imprisoned. So Paul was at peace even though he did not know what the future held, even though things might look pretty threatening. It would be natural to be discouraged, but Paul's perspective overcame that temptation.

In these words from Philippians, Paul gave three challenges which are still relevant to us today, as we live our own lives with their ups and downs, their problems and their pains, their high points and their uncertainties. He also in these verses shares a wonderful promise.

And if you want to remember this message, I'm going to give you four words, all beginning with the letter P, which of course also stands for Paul and Philippians. No prizes for remembering, but there might be a bit of encouragement attached!

Firstly, there is **praise**. Paul says to rejoice always, to rejoice in every situation. But he doesn't tell us to rejoice **because** we've had bad news, or because things have gone wrong, or we are in pain. What he does say is to

rejoice in the Lord. We always have reason to rejoice because the Lord loves us, because the Lord saves us, because the Lord is committed to us, because the Lord is with us.

We naturally rejoice when pleasant things are happening. But when things are not like that, it is important to remember what the Lord has done for us, what the Lord means to us and what we mean to the Lord, and what the Lord promises. When we turn our minds to the Lord, and praise him for all that he is, all that he has done, and all that he still does for us, we are reminded of things we might easily forget when hard times come. We don't pretend about the problems of life, but we can get a bigger perspective. As we praise the Lord, we can learn to rejoice realistically **in him**, in tough times as well as in good times. Praise strengthens us, and brings us joy in the Lord. In praise, we can learn to rejoice in the Lord.

The second word is **patience**. Paul says that our *gentleness* should be clear to everyone. This is not just about what we tell our grandchildren when they are patting a kitten: "Be gentle!" It is about the whole way we treat people. We are not just to treat people fairly, but to treat them graciously and generously and kindly. So when we feel wronged by people, we don't try to get back at them. Nor do we hold on to our anger. We seek to be ready to forgive them, to show understanding and patience towards them. That is how Christ responded to those who crucified him, and it is the gracious way he has treated us.

If we read more of this letter of Paul, we would see that there were tensions within the congregation at Philippi, and so Paul's call to be understanding and accepting and forgiving and patient was particularly relevant. And the reminder that the Lord is near is also a reminder that this patient attitude, this gentle approach to people who are not always just like us, is indeed the way of Christ. The way of Christ is the way of love, and in a world which has not yet been put right, we need to demonstrate the way of love and patience in our lives and relationships.

The third word is **prayer**. Paul tells us not to get worried about anything. Of course that's easy for him to say, but he had plenty of things to worry about, not least of which was whether he would shortly be executed. And he had plenty of time as a prisoner to spend worrying. Paul's approach is not that vacuous "Don't worry – be happy!" attitude. But worry does us no good: Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. Sometimes

when we are tempted to worry, there are things we can do which are much more useful. When a student is worried about the exams coming up, it is much more useful to work hard than to worry about them! And the thing that Paul says is that when we are tempted to worry, we are to take our worries to the Lord in prayer.

We deal with our worries by handing them over to the Lord. After all, he knows best what to do, and he is able to answer in the way that is best. And even if his answer is not exactly what we asked for, he still hears us and he is with us in our difficulties.

But let's remind ourselves of *how* we are to pray. Paul says to pray **with thanksgiving**. Thanksgiving reminds us of how the Lord has helped us in the past, and how he has answered our prayers. That in itself is an encouragement to our faith, and to our prayers. It is spiritually healthy to pray with thanksgiving.

Praise, patience and prayer – all important in our lives as followers of Christ, and as we look forward to the Lord's return.

And as we put these things into practice, we will more and more experience the Lord's **peace** – the peace of God, which is so great that we cannot begin to understand its dimensions. But peace is not just the absence of conflict, or a sweet lovely feeling: it is when things are well – and especially when our relationships are in good condition. When things are right between us and our loved ones, our neighbours, and our Lord.

And God's peace will keep us safe – not necessarily free from difficulties and challenges and problems, but safe in our relationship with God, safe in his care, safe in his kingdom.

Life in this world is not always easy: the kingdom has not yet come in all its fullness. But as we **praise** the Lord and rejoice in his blessings, as we show **patience** and understanding and generosity to one another and to our loved one and neighbours, as we **pray** with thanksgiving for our own needs as well as the needs of others, we shall discover more and more the **peace** and strength of God, the peace which passes all understanding, the peace which assures us that we are in his care, here and now, and right until that great day when we shall see our glorious and loving Saviour face to face. Amen.

Paul Weaver