

Sunday 17 December 2006: The Third Sunday of Advent

Hope out of darkness

Readings: Zephaniah 3: 14-end; Luke 3: 7-18

Zephaniah, the largely gloomy prophet who brought a message of war and destruction and John, that hard, prickly, uncomfortable character who addressed his listeners as ‘poisonous reptiles who’d only turned up in order to escape God’s judgement’ – enough to send them hurrying away in horror one would have thought. But no – so what was going on?

During the long years of Myra Hindley’s imprisonment there were regular public debates about whether she should ever be released or whether she should remain there for the rest of her natural life and a recent dramatisation of the late Lord Longford’s role in that whole story brought the question freshly to mind. One discussion programme on the issue while Hindley was still alive revealed, as often happened, some sharp differences of opinion among those taking part. All the frequently rehearsed arguments were used and it was only in a listeners feedback call that a different point was made. He argues that if the decision was taken to keep her in prison until she died she shouldn’t be told that that was the intention. That one of the things that constitutes our humanity is the ability to hope, however dark and difficult the circumstances. To take away someone’s capacity to hope, he said, is to make them less than human and we have no right to do that. Now, of course, that wasn’t an uncontroversial contribution to the debate but, whether intentionally or not, it did pick up a recurrent theme in both Old and New Testaments – the possibility of God’s gift of hope to a world that struggles and to all of us who sin, over and over again.

The prophet Zephaniah proclaimed a largely gloomy message for the people of his day. They’d been rebellious and wicked, paying no heed to God’s ways or his warnings so Zephaniah prophesied that war and destruction would hit them. Jerusalem, their beloved capital, would be razed to the ground unless they repented and changed their ways. The first two chapters of Zephaniah don’t make for cheery reading but then, suddenly, something happens. In the third and final chapter of this small book, the tone changes. Even in the face of widespread disaster there is still hope, not because of human goodness but because God is a God of hope.

And so, in Advent, a time that we more traditionally perhaps associate with darkness even if a darkness we trust will become shot through with light – and with quietness, reflection, penitence and waiting – we’re given a reading that speaks of ‘singing aloud, shouting, rejoicing and exulting – as on a day of festival’. For Zephaniah is looking ahead, beyond the time of punishment. He foresees, not just a reversal of fortune but a major change in people’s attitudes and he brings a message of hope from amongst the gloom.

His insight is a reminder to us that, when we are fearful or apprehensive about what’s happening in the world or the way our society seems to be heading our real hope is grounded in a faithful God who never gives up on us, whatever the circumstances. That can be of especial encouragement at moments when we may feel like throwing in the towel. This may be over situations in our own lives or when we look at the bigger picture.

Many things may cause us to despair today. Medical science has gone a long way towards eliminating many diseases that have been a scourge to the world but it sometimes seems that, as we find the means to deal with one tragic disease another appears to take its place. Many seemingly intractable issues of peace and justice in the world that brought enormous conflict and damage during the 20th century have indeed been resolved but others then emerge to cause further tragedy, unhappiness, fear and loss of life. We explore and learn more about the planet on which we live only in the process to discover that we've upset some of its delicate balances and put it at risk.

The message of hope becomes increasingly important for us. But although that message is one of the greatest of all messages it's also one that the world uses to batter and ridicule religion and people of faith. To the rest of the world we may look unrealistically Pollyannish or like Dr Pangloss in *Candide* proclaiming that 'this is the best of all possible worlds' – if not today then tomorrow. And it seems very understandable really that that is the superficial impression that some people may get – and that needs to be righted and we need to examine our own theology of hope.

In some ways John perhaps doesn't help with that. There's something of the manic street preacher in him – something that may make us think of the man with a megaphone standing outside a station or shopping precinct, haranguing people as they pass by as to whether they're saved – something about him that makes us want to avert our eyes and hurry past. But actually, that isn't what happened. People flocked to hear him. Yes, the culture was very different, but even so it feels as if something remarkable was going on in this strange man.

And what's going on seems, at first, to be far removed from hope. His vision was of judgement – and of quite a stern judgement – not the sort of judgement with a positive side to it that we tend to want to search for today. No, here is the woodsman ready to raise his axe for the first stroke, 'even now, he says, the axe is lying at the root of the trees' ready to cut down all that don't bear good fruit. The farmer's winnowing fork is in his hand as he strides towards the threshing floor.

John certainly gave every impression of being a pretty austere person with a highly developed sense of religious and moral earnestness and not a bundle of laughs. He seemed only to be able to conceive of greatness in terms of a severity that excelled his own. And yet, John and his message are full of the unexpected. In rebuking the people for succumbing to the temptation of resting on their spiritual pedigree as it were 'Do not begin to say to yourselves "We have Abraham as our ancestor"' he says, he speaks of God fulfilling his promises to Abraham in unexpected ways. 'God is able, from these stones, to raise up children to Abraham'.

Many of those who listened to John were unexpected people. The religious leaders ignored him but his preaching had an irresistible fascination for some of the most unlikely people. The tax collectors for example, a group from whom the society of the day expected little that was ethical, came to him for baptism. Normal expectations and deep prejudices being revered – signs of hope. And they asked the question 'What then should we do?'

The despised soldiers, in the service of Herod and enforcing the will of Rome, came asking the question and wanting baptism. Again, expectation reversed, signs of hope and love for the despised.

And the metaphor of winnowing that sounds so harsh with the chaff being burnt with unquenchable fire, is perhaps really intended to focus us on the primary purpose of the winnower – not to dispose

of the chaff but to gather the wheat and so Luke can still describe even John's fulminations as the proclaiming of good news – the sign of hope.

There is much cynicism around today. Those who would look to 'experts' to solve the world's problems – be they scientists, economists, politicians or, indeed, theologians, have been disappointed too often by their failures and distrust has set in. For some, this has meant concluding that the world's problems are insoluble and that the only way to live is by focussing on the local and the small – what we can see and perhaps hope to have some degree of control over. But that surely is a life without hope and not what Zephaniah or John – both of whom had dark sides to them – were on about.

They both had a vision of how things could be. We may also have a vision of the world as we would hope it to be – a goal – even if not a humanly attainable one. But Zephaniah and John might want to say that that isn't the ultimate object of our hope. That that vision of the perfect world is something we should for hope but not hope in. Zephaniah is much more of a realist than many of us today. He knew that there would be times of disaster and distress – for individuals and for the world – often the result of human actions, sometimes not. But he also had a deep sense that such experiences don't preclude true hope for that isn't found in the external circumstances of life but in the presence of the living God – the God whose incarnation we celebrate in just a few days time.

The birth of Christ didn't fulfil the hopes of everyone – it didn't fulfil the hopes of those who wanted a triumphalist warrior king as saviour for example – but those who would sometimes encounter rough and stony ground and embrace those in order to follow him have, time and again, discovered where true hope lies.