

13th December 2009 Advent 3C Rebecca Newland

Readings: Zephaniah 3.14-0; Song of Isaiah - page 391; Philippians 4.4-7; Luke 3.7-18

Do not fear the judgment – Rejoice!!

Advent is a time of waiting, waiting for the coming of the Lord as the babe at Christmas. It is a time of expectant hope and joy. The fact that the Christ is coming is indeed something to be joy filled about. However Advent is also a time of waiting on and preparing for the judgment of God. Today we have John the Baptist saying these words, *“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”*. These words in amongst all those readings about joy and salvation are very jarring.

Judgment can conjure up for us fairly negative images of God. In the modern western world we have interpreted this picture of God as portraying a capricious, arbitrary and punishing being, waiting to catch us out. Christians have been right to dismiss this idea of God but it leaves us with the question – what is the judgment of God and what does it mean for us? And how do we reconcile the love of God with the judgment of God?

The Old Testament prophets also struggled with this question. Zephaniah, the prophet of our first reading, had a particularly difficult context. His name means ‘Yahweh has hidden’ and it is thought he was born during the reign of Manasseh, around 600 BC. We find from reading the second book of Kings that Manasseh was one of those rulers who, as scripture so frequently states, did what was ‘evil’ in the sight of the Lord. In fact Manasseh was one of the worst. He reinstated the worship of idols and rebuilt the altars to other Gods, Baal and Molech. In Yahweh’s own temple in Jerusalem he placed a carved image of Asherah. These other Gods were not just benign entities. They demanded child sacrifice and ritual slayings. In verse 16 of 2 Kings 21 we read that Manasseh ‘shed very much innocent blood’. Of course it was not just Manasseh. The whole nation turned from God and did what was evil.

As one would expect, Zephaniah had harsh words for his own community. He condemns their religious idolatry in the worship of Baal and Molech. He deplores the murder of innocents. He denounces the wanton luxury that the rich have obtained through the exploitation of the poor.

Zephaniah highlighted that the government, its officials, prophets and priests were all predators who destroyed the powerless and the poor (3:3–4). This is a people, writes Zephaniah, who “knows no shame” (3:5).

Into this context Zephaniah declares that God’s judgment is coming. But when is this "day" of judgment? A simple reading is that he foresaw the coming invasion of Babylon, roughly fifty years away in his future. But given Zephaniah's global pronouncements, he might have envisioned not only the near future in history for Israel, but also a far future beyond history for the whole world. However, we need not get caught up in worrying about the time. Discerning God's judgment and coming has less to do with solving a puzzle about *chronos* (clock time), and everything to do with sensing *kairos*—that special moment when God speaks and acts today.

Into his community and into our community Zephaniah states that we should rejoice about this speaking and acting of God. But if God’s judgment is such a terrible thing how can Zephaniah make this statement. How can any prophet write of joy? I’d like to suggest three reasons.

Firstly, the judgment of God gives dignity and certainty to our lives. I recently heard this point of view from Thorwald Lorenzen, a Canberra theologian who teaches at the Catholic university. The judgment of God is not about condemnation. In fact condemnation has no part in God’s agenda as John 3:17 makes clear. The judgment of God is about determining what is good. It is about knowing the difference between two ways of being. It is about knowing the difference between Ang Sung Su Chi and the Burmese military junta. It is knowing the difference between Ghandi and British colonialism. It is knowing the difference between Oscar Romero and the El Salvador ARENA death squad. Without the judgment of God then right and wrong mean nothing and they are simply relative realities.

The psalms are full of stories and laments as the people urge and entreat God to come and judge the nations. There is no relativity in their world. Their picture of God’s judgment is a wholly positive thing as they could see that only God could evaluate and judge with compassion and fairness. For example psalm 10 has the lines, “*Arise, O Lord God, lift up your hand: forget not the poor. Break the power of the ungodly, search out wickedness, to help the poor and fatherless to their right, that they may no more be terrified from their land*”.

For we readers who scoff at notions of divine judgment as embarrassing or unworthy of God, the powerless in the world remind us that the alternative to judgment is impunity for the oppressors of the world, along with the surrender of hope for the vindication of the oppressed. Zephaniah spoke to and for ancient Judaism but he speaks today to Sudans Christians, Darfur's dispossessed Muslims, Hindu's untouchable Dalits, and all the exploited of the earth who have endured violence, plunder, displacement, starvation, burning of villages, and the systematic rape of their women no matter their age. Zephaniah prophesies a message of radical redemption: a day is coming when *"never again will you fear any harm"* (3:15). Surely, this is a reason to rejoice and hope in the coming judgment of the Lord?

Secondly, God is in the midst of us. Zephaniah is one of many biblical writers who say, *"Fear not. Do not be afraid"*. Paul says this as he sits in a Roman prison writing to the church in Philippi. They say this because they believe that as Zephaniah puts it *"the king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst"* (3:15). This king *will not leave*. He dwells in the midst of his people so that they need not fear disaster anymore.

And this king, this Lord, rejoices over his people with gladness and loud singing. Zephaniah says God will renew them in his love. What a awesome picture. This image of God bears no resemblance to Aristotle's "unmoved mover," or, to the idea of a divine watchmaker who sets the world in motion and lets it go. It bears no relation to a distant heavenly being who impartially dispenses justice, punishment and reward. This is a picture of God as a lover of his creation, immersed in it, rejoicing in it, longing to embrace and renew it. This God is moved, is deeply affected, by human attitudes and actions. This God does not watch from a distance, but enters into the life of the world. God enters even into human flesh, through the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation.

For we Christians the judgment of God is actually the truth of Jesus. In the creed we say those words – *"He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end"*. Our judge is Jesus, the compassionate one, who chose to go to the cross and who chose forgiveness rather than wreaking vengeance on those who imprisoned, tortured and murdered him. The judgment and truth of Jesus is always in terms of compassion and forgiveness. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians, *"God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them – so we say be reconciled!"*.

There is a great line in the novel, *The Cider House Rules*, by John Irving. Irving has just described a back street abortion clinic where the screams of the women are covered up by the sound of a tone deaf choir singing hymns. One of Irving's characters, an obstetrician called Larch, goes to this place to try and help. After seeing the suffering and hearing the cacophony there is this line, "*A fussy or critical God, thought Wilbur Larch, would strike us all dead*". But clearly God is not fussy or critical or capricious or punishing or indeed, as we look at human history, we would all be dead. Clearly God sees the wonder and beauty in us. Clearly God sees the best we have to offer and not the worst we can do. (As Zephaniah puts it the Lord, "takes away the judgment against us".)

But what about all that burning of chaff to which John the Baptist so powerfully alludes? Well my third point is that God's judgment purges, cleanses and restores us. When we read this passage about John the Baptist we assume that he is talking about people as wheat and chaff. That is some people are good, like wholesome wheat, and will be gathered together and go off to heaven. Others are bad, like the chaff left over from threshing. These go to the other place. But what if we read this passage as referring to the wheat and chaff inside each of one of us? What if, as we opened ourselves to God and his love more and more, the good wheat, the good seed, would become greater and greater and the chaff would be burned up?

Two images we have of the divine are light and fire. The light is Jesus Christ. He is the light of the world that shines in our darkness. The fire is the power of the Holy Spirit that John the Baptist says will come from Christ. Both these elements burn up that which is chaff and dross. In the light and fire gold emerges from the depths.

Meister Eckhart, a 13th century mystic and theologian, wrote that we are all born with the divine spark within us, fire that can never be extinguished, and our lives task is to turn the spark into a flame and then into a conflagration, the fire that compassion brings. In the spark of the soul, Eckhart said, "*God glows and burns with all the divine wealth and all the divine bliss*". And Hildegard of Bingen, another medieval mystic, wrote, "*I, that is God, remain hidden in every kind of reality as fiery power. Everything burns because of me in such a way as our breath constantly moves us, like the wind-tossed flame in a fire. All of this lives in its essence and there is no death in it. For I am life.*"

This light and fire is transformative. In this picture God's presence and hence judgment is a purifying response to everything that dehumanizes us including and violence and exploitation. And does our moral

imagination really believe that a Pol Pot, a Hitler, or an Idi Amin slaughters with impunity? Do we really want God to leave *us* to our own worst impulses of envy, greed and anger, or do we want Him to judge, rescue and purify us from them? The most terrifying texts in the Bible are not those of divine judgment but those that suggest that God abandons us to the consequences of our own sin, our own poor choices, foolishness, apathy, ignorance, and the like (cf. Romans 1:24, 26, 28). The "refiner's fire" that John the Baptist announces can purge, cleanse and restore us. We can then get to that point where we live in and with love, and not through and by fear. We can do what John urged his listeners to do when they asked, "What should we do?" We can share what we are blessed with, we can collect only what we need and we can be satisfied with what we have.

So this is good news – we can rejoice about God's judgment because God gives dignity and certainty to his creation, he is in the midst of us, God with us, and his powerful love and light transforms and restores us. Rejoice, rejoice and again I say rejoice. Amen.