

Some reflections on the readings for the Third Sunday of Advent

When the problems of the world are too large for us to cope with – the pandemic, the climate crisis, injustice, power posturing and threats, disunity among people – what is there that we, insignificant though we feel, can do? We can only and usefully act responsibly in our own small corner, relating with love and compassion with the people around us and by doing well whatever we need to do. This is John the Baptist's advice to those who come to him for conversion and baptism. This is what we have to do to hasten the deeper coming of the Saviour. This is perhaps all we can do to bring Christ to our world today.

Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20

The first verse of the book gives us the dates of the prophet Zephaniah's ministry. It was during the reign of king Josiah of Judah (640 – 609BC). Josiah is noted for his great religious reform following the discovery in the Temple of the book of the Law, which in its entirety or core constitutes the book we know as Deuteronomy. It was traditionally thought to date back to Moses but it was almost certainly produced nearer to the time of Josiah himself.

Our passage today is probably a later addition to the prophecies of Zephaniah and appears to be from the time of the exile (c597 – 538BC). It is essentially a psalm or canticle rejoicing that the Lord is enthroned in Jerusalem, that God is with his people, that he will honour the poor and the dispossessed, that the dispersed will be restored and their hopes realized.

For the Psalm - Isaiah 12: 2 – 6

This hymn of thanksgiving serves as our psalm on Sunday. It rounds off the section of Isaiah beginning with chapter 6 and known as the book of Immanuel ('God-with-us'). It is appropriate for Advent as we prepare to celebrate the most decisive expression of God's presence with his people in the person of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 4: 4 – 7

'Rejoice!' says Paul to his readers, twice in the first verse. This gives us the subtitle for this Third Sunday of Advent – *Gaudete* or Rejoice Sunday. Why rejoice? Because the Lord is near. Whatever we are going through now, we can still rejoice. In Christ, God wants to be with us where we are and to share all that takes our joy away. God wants to give us *shalom*, a peace that means far more than simply the absence of hostility. It is in fact the life of God in our hearts, our homes, our communities. It is no less to experience a foretaste of the life of the world to come.

Luke 3: 7 – 18

'On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh!' In so doing so he calls those who came to him a 'brood of vipers,' who fall back on their religious heritage as being sufficient for their salvation. But commendably they come to him asking what they need to do. His response is 'change your ways.' *Live* the faith that you have inherited rather than boast about it. By sharing food, by fair taxes, by an ethical administration of justice, this would indeed be good news in a conquered and humiliated province.

John says that the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This looks forward to Pentecost when one of the signs of the coming of the Spirit is tongues of fire. There is both a purifying and destructive element to fire. There is both a renewing process, and for those who resist, who refuse to change, there is the news that in the

coming kingdom of God, lives based on selfishness, lack of love, exclusiveness, the neglect and marginalisation of others, simply cannot survive.

The Advent prayer of hope is 'Come, Lord Jesus!' Are we aware of what is ours to do to prepare for his coming?

A prayer for this Sunday:

Father God, you are the source of all happiness.

Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ brought to us and to everyone glad tidings of your love and life, but our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

May your joy be our joy, your love be our love, your acceptance of us be our welcome to all with whom we share life in your world.

With Jesus among us, may our communities and each one of us be happy, and may our happiness be a foretaste, even in our troubles, of the lasting joy you have prepared for us.

We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.