

Sunday 13th December 2009 - Advent 3

Zephania 3:14-20
Psalm 24:1-5 (alt translation)
Philippians 4:4-9
Luke 3:7-18

In the build-up to the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change taking place right now in Copenhagen, Sweden, the media at last began to give space and time to what is undoubtedly the most pressing issue facing humanity.

The world is in crisis. The effects of the past 200 years of galloping industrial development, the extraction and burning of the carbon-based fuels that took millennia to form, and the seduction of highly-skilled and manipulative advertising has catapulted the world into self-induced disaster mode.

It is clear from the work of scientists in many disciplines that the world as we know it is now being degraded at such a fast pace that only a massive change of behaviour on the part of a significant proportion of the world's population will save the earth from consequences that will make it uninhabitable for humans – and for most other species.

We are consuming the earth's resources at an ever-increasing rate. In the process we are poisoning the air we breathe, the water we drink and the soil that produces our food – while heating our world's atmosphere to a point of no return.

Individuals in faith-based organisations, including within the Christian churches, have been warning us for at least the past thirty-five years of what is happening. But their call has fallen largely on deaf ears. Few have been the effective responses, few have managed to mobilise faith communities and their members.

If ever there was a time for the prophetic message of John the Baptist, it is now. The leaders of the world sit at Copenhagen talking. Some try to avoid taking responsibility for what the industry and wealth of their countries have done to the earth. Others push hard for justice to be done, for the global south to be given a chance, for the voice of the voiceless to be heard.

For this climate crisis which is threatening the world as we know it has largely come about from decades of uneven world development, from the greed of the global north as they extracted the resources of the global south and took them back to Europe, to Britain, to North America, where generations of people have known the good life at the expense of most of the rest of the world.

The human victims of climate change will typically include those who have contributed least to the problem, such as the poor peasants of Bangladesh and low-lying Pacific islands.

But we can't escape responsibility. Many in this congregation are already taking significant steps to reduce their carbon footprint, to adopt a more simple lifestyle. But, as is pointed out in the new book *'Climate Change: a Challenge to the Churches in South Africa'*:

'Addressing climate change is a task that has to be tackled through global efforts. Politicians, business leaders, scientists, analysts, educators, journalists, community leaders and religious leaders alike will all have to make contributions to take on the problem. Churches can only play a minor supporting role in this regard. Nevertheless it is important to raise the question whether the existing responses are really in line with the gravity and the global scale of the problem. Although these responses may be sincere and the commitment shown admirable, will this really be enough, even if everyone (or all Christians) were to follow such examples.? Or is this, yet again, a matter of doing too little, too late?

'It is important to recognise what is at stake in this question,' the book goes on. 'Those of us in the urban middle class find it difficult to adopt a lifestyle that is not harmful to the environment. We may take some modest steps to address climate change – such as recycling and re-using resources. Such steps are highly appropriate to challenge consumerist habits, and demand considerable effort and dedication. However, a guilty conscience and a 10% reduction in resource usage would not nearly be sufficient, given the scale of the problem.' (pgs 18/19) It feels like a time of despair.

As we celebrate the 3rd Sunday in Advent, we discover that our readings speak words of truth into our situation.

Zephaniah has spoken earlier in his book of the righteous judgement that he sees God wreaking on the world that has once again become wicked and turned away from their loving Creator: *'I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. ... I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the Lord.'* (1:2/3)

In our context this sounds like justified punishment for what God's people have done. But by the time the prophet gets near the end of his terrible message, Zephaniah shows what God will actually do: *'Wait for me, says the Lord.'* (3:8) *'I will change the speech of the peoples.'* (3:9) And then, as we read today: *'You shall fear disaster no more. ... I will remove disaster from you.'* (3:15 & 18) *'Rejoice and exult with all your heart.'* (3:14) There is hope.

Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi tells his readers to *'Rejoice in the Lord alway'*, even in times of despair. For the gospel of Christ brings hope in desperate situations. We have to take responsibility, says Paul, for opening ourselves up to God's transformation, for allowing God to change us. We need to keep our thoughts focussed on the good, the true, the honourable – and behave accordingly. We need to turn away from greed, from over-consumerism, from over-use of the earth's resources – to let God transform us.

For the dangers to God's world cannot be fixed from the outside, however many conferences we have. And we do need conferences, we do need responsible world leaders to accept historical responsibility for what has gone wrong with the world and to be prepared to plan together for a better future, a sustainable future. But the real problem (as the book points out) lies inside us: *'in the human heart, in our attitudes, aspirations and orientation, in our priorities, habits, practices and institutions'* (p.6) And this is precisely the problem that John the Baptist addresses, as we discover in today's gospel passage: *'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. ... Bear fruits worthy of repentance.'*

But perhaps it is quite simple if we are open to the necessary metanoia – the turning around into the direction of the coming Saviour. For John didn't only speak out harsh, analytical criticism of the system under which people lived: he had simple, practical advice for those who heard: *'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.'* And to the tax collectors: *'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.'* And to the soldiers: *'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages.'*

This is the gospel, the good news – news of a turning, of the deep moral courage to do what we know in our guts is right. And God will show us how to do more than we are doing at present. We will have the courage to also take part in the bigger actions: in the letter-writing, the vigils, the bell-ringing, the protests to politicians and business, the on-line petitions, the discussions to deepen our real understanding, the sharing of big ideas, the actions that address the root causes as well as the symptoms. For we have to make the voice of reason and justice, of sanity and hope, heard too.

As the prophets like Zephaniah spoke in their time, as John the Baptist spoke in his time, so must we speak truth to power, speak out the prophetic word. We have to require moral leadership from those in government, in business, those who sit at Copenhagen in our name. We have to work with God to save the planet.

For the baby, our Saviour, whom we will come to worship at Christmas - this baby born in poverty and degradation in a stable – this baby grew up. Our baby Saviour grew into a adult, who turned the world upside down, who was killed because he would not stop living a life of love and challenge for everyone, regardless of their status or wealth, race or gender, who exposed the hypocrisy and corruption of those in power and who refused to remain silent.

And we who are Christians can do no less than follow the way of Christ our Saviour. May God give us the clarity, the wisdom and the courage so to do. Amen.

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