

Sermon for 12 December 2021

St Andrew's, Newgate Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, Diocese of Newcastle

3rd Sunday of Advent – Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18

May my words and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to the Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We are more than halfway past this Advent season, being very dark and cold especially with the recent Storm Arwen and Storm Barra. From a wider perspective, I think it's not misplaced to reflect briefly on recent tragic situations that have dominated the news.

*** The continuing sordid saga of the detention of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe**

The British Government's continual refusal to honour a debt to the Iranian Government – under the pretence of economic sanctions – has meant that Nazanin continues to be a sort of pawn in international relations and rivalry. We give thanks for Richard Ratcliffe's cold and brave 21-day hunger strike in front of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but has it shifted the government's belligerent stance despite dissenting voices from within its ranks? Let's not forget there are many others unjustly incarcerated in foreign jails and not knowing where their fate lies!

**** The tragic and painful death of 6-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes**

I need not labour on this heinous situation that has caught the country's attention for the past week! We might reflect on what the (evil?) forces are that could drive two persons with parental responsibilities to end one young life. The thought processes that lie behind those actions might ultimately be unfathomable. Yet, having seen similar cases in the past few decades should we not be irked when the authorities keep mouthing those tiresome mantras – "lessons need to be learnt"?

***** The unending plight of refugees across the world**

The recent tragic deaths of those men, women, and children in the English Channel was only the tip of the tip of the iceberg. These were human beings desperately in search of safety and mostly escaping from situations of endless conflict, poverty, human rights abuses, and insecurity. Yet, thousands have been held as 'human collateral' by Belarus's despotic leader in his effort to goad the European Union through the migrant crisis that he has caused. All this for the sake of revenge against the sanctions imposed on Belarus by the EU.

When confronted with such situations where evil might seem so pervasive, it's difficult to find meaning and to make connections. Especially so when compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic. Here, I must be careful in making any glib statements.

Might the situations that we are conflicted with not suggest a certain lack of remorse on our part? Be it the lack of any progress in securing the release of Nazanin Ratcliffe by the current Conservative Government, or the blindness of the administratively

over-burdened children's social services, or the continuing engendering of the hostile environment towards refugees and asylum-seekers with the insidious myth that they are swarming these islands.

Our lack of remorse also suggest that these are problems we had created ourselves especially through conflicts that Britain had started years ago, and we are now reaping their 'rewards'. We so often like to demonise the 'other' – the Middle East is a favourite target – but fail to see the 'demons' within our national psyche and structures.

I hope I am not giving the impression that history works in any sort of rigid deterministic way, in other words if you do good, you'll be blessed, if you behave badly, you'll be cursed. Life is never that simple! But I do think that when we wrestle with some of the difficult and not-often-read texts in the Old Testament, we may begin to glimpse some of their meanings in their ancient contexts and appropriate them for the understanding of our modern world.

Zephaniah 3:14-20 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgements against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸ as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.

And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.

²⁰ At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.

That small prophetic book of Zephaniah (tucked away in the little corner among the 12 so-called Minor Prophets) which is in reality a very complex book with its history of editorial revisions, with links to other prophetic books and a long history of interpretation, speaks of the coming of the day of the wrath of God. Reading it closely, you'll see God's judgement on both Israel and the surrounding nations. Before any sort of restoration can take place, there will be punishment.

The ancient Israelites were thrown into exile on at least two occasions, for their waywardness and vice. Before any hope of future salvation is realised, there must be divine punishment. In the meantime, the promises of hope and restoration in Zephaniah chapter 3 are granted to the faithful, to comfort them in the suffering they too must share.

So, Advent is an opportunity to take stock, an opportunity for a 'faith audit' as well as a 'tasks audit'. That's the New Testament passage from Luke's Gospel of John the Baptist with his totally uncompromising message:

Luke 3:7-18 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' ¹¹ In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' ¹² Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' ¹³ He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ 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.'

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

“You brood of vipers” [“You snakes” – he was effectively swearing at them when they came to be baptised!! Imagine yourselves being addressed as such when you come to church!] “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” (Luke 3:7-8a) Or, in another translation:

“Who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send? Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins.”

Forget the fact that you have a noble ancestry. Don't hide behind your racial and religious arrogance. It won't make a difference. Start with what you are now. John continues: **"... for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."** (Luke 3:8c)

So, we always must be careful with John the Baptist. Jesus hasn't even arrived on the scene yet! When we cannot bear fruit, we are of no use; that's John's essential message. **It's meant to disturb us; Advent ought to disturb us.** And John certainly had a few key people in mind in the passage: those failing to show compassion to others in need, those known for their unjust practices, those who are discontent and oppressing others. Might we see more of such John the Baptist figures in today's world; perhaps some glimpses of him in the scrutiny on Tory sleaze and parliamentary standards, or indeed, on our standards in public life?

Advent not only disturbs us, but it also offers us a pause [for me the pause button is so helpful when I watch movies on the iPlayer ... time for the loo break or a fresh cuppa] ... John the Baptist's message allows us to reflect on what it means to repent, to "turn around" (a key Hebrew concept).

To make way for the coming of Jesus involves reviewing the way we live:

- Do we need to switch our outlook and turn our path of living in a new direction?
- Are we so comfortable in our successes (perhaps) that they have dulled our sensitivities to the pain of others around us?
- Are we too caught up with the pressures within the Church that we lose sight of the wider community?
- Or am I too settled in my own comfort zone to be bothered to seek after justice and righteousness?

As Christians, praise and rejoicing mark us out as people of hope and joy, while at the same time holding in tension our outlook oriented towards the end-times (Jesus' coming and return – truly Advent) and ethical living.

Our challenge is to be neither so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good, nor so absorbed in life on earth that we fail to notice the signs of God's coming and presence. This sort of living, as the Gospel constantly reminds us, is often costly!

Amen!