Sermon for Advent 3 on Sunday 12th December 2021 by The Rev’d Graham Earney

Zephaniah 3.14-end

Luke 3.7-18

Last Sunday Colin preached about the nature of prophecy. He spoke from the readings set for the day – from Malachi and Luke’s gospel, which spoke about John the Baptist. Having looked at the readings for today – the final words from Zephaniah followed by the continuation of the story of John the Baptist from Luke – I could see the overlap.

Indeed, I was tempted to encourage you to go home and read Colin’s words, as sent out in the email about last week’s services. As I agreed with everything Colin had said, I could get away without preaching today! As I didn’t think you would let me get away that lightly, I had to think of a new angle. Something which augmented what we have heard about prophets and John, looking at the subject from a slightly new angle.

The new angle is to look at where the prophets were speaking from. The first group were the cultic prophets. These were the insiders. They spoke from within the corridors of power. They were men who had the ear of kings and chief priests. Notable are Isaiah, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah, although the latter might not be so easy to categorise.

On the other hand there were the desert prophets, Hosea is a prime example, and, to a lesser extent in our eyes, Elijah and Elisha. These were the prophets who were outside the political system and who railed at the people from afar. They called for repentance, a change of direction for individuals and for society collectively. John the Baptist can be seen as being in this tradition.

And then there were those who seemed to straddle both traditions. Amos spoke both from within the system and from a standpoint beyond it. Jeremiah, although placed within Jerusalem appears to preach against those who remained within its precincts, those who had been carried off in the Exile, as well as those who had run away to the northern extremities of Egypt!

Let’s look at our two readings today to see how these different traditions play out. But before we look at the passage from Zephaniah let me ask you a question: “When did you last read the book of Zephaniah?” “Can any of you remember?” – Well, based on the fact we use a three year lectionary it would have been the 3rd Sunday of Advent 2018. I would love to tell you ‘ah, yes, I remember it well’ but I can’t. It clearly left as much of a memory with me as it has with you!

Zephaniah spoke from within the court of king Josiah, who reigned from 640 to 609BC. It is likely that he did so before Josiah’s great reform in 621. Much of his language is a bridge between Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, with whom he overlapped and many scholars think profoundly affected.

One has to say that overall the book is very gloomy – judgement is the main theme of most of it. It has oracles against the nations and a particular accusation against Jerusalem. However, towards the end it talks of purging the city as a kind of salvation.

The final passage, which we read today, speaks of a hopeful future. A time when God truly returns to Jerusalem.

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

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

The Lord has taken away the judgements against you ….

The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst,

You shall fear disaster no more.”

In so speaking it looks beyond the immediate to the time in the future when the Lord God would truly be with his people. Christian scholars have equated this to the time of Jesus. Other scholars have said the ending is so ‘up beat’ compared to the majority of the book that it could be a later addition by an editor.

It is time to move to John the Baptist. As we have said, he is clearly in the bracket of the wild prophets of the desert. Matthew and Luke follow Mark in describing him in this way.

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight …”

Mark and Matthew record John as preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John is described as clothed with camel’s hair, having a leather girdle around his waist. His diet consists of locusts and wild honey – very much a desert diet!

John acts as the forerunner, the one who came before Jesus. In addition to preaching repentance, Luke has John instructing the people who came out to him. He has a kind of Question and Answer session in today’s reading as he seeks to give practical advice to the like of the tax collector and the soldier in how to apply repentance to daily living.

It has always intrigued me as to why so many trekked out into the wilderness to be told off by John. I think there were at least three reasons:

1. John must have been a great orator – you don’t get a crowd if you can’t hold a crowd.
2. John came to be seen as a redefinition of Elijah, the great prophet of old, who was still held in great awe.
3. And John was seen as the one pointing to an even greater teacher, who might be the Messiah; especially as he was describing that one as ‘mightier’, “the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.”

The wonder of John’s ministry wasn’t that he drew great crowds, or even that he preached repentance. It was that he realised he wasn’t the star billing – one greater than him would follow him – Jesus, the Messiah. He was prepared to diminish so that Jesus could take centre stage.

Last week we heard of the need for prophets, and in our own small way for us to be prophetic. Now we need to recognise our position as forerunners in the mould of John the Baptist. It is not our piety that should be the centre of our ministry. We need to diminish our role and our importance so that we can more effectively point the way to Christ. We need to see ourselves as signposts which lead others to find Christ in their lives. Signposts which should be the signs of the kingdom of God in the present day.

So this Christmas season let us pledge ourselves to show Christ to the world anew so that the light of Christ Jesus is brought to bear on the lives of others and God is glorified.

Rev’d Graham Earney