

Christmas Joys and Fair-weather Supporters

A sermon on Zephaniah 3: 14-20 & Luke 3: 7-18 by Nathan Nettleton, 12 December 2021

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Message

The joyous message of Christmas demands a response from us all year round, but it also asks us to graciously receive those who do not respond.

Sermon

The word of God comes to us with some contrasting tones of voice tonight. And I reckon those contrasts and conflicts are not too far beneath the surface for many of us as the Christmas festivities get into full swing. Mixed emotions and conflicted feelings swirl around for many of us at Christmas, and I think that perhaps these readings are calling us to spend some of our Advent preparation time reflecting on these things and preparing ourselves for how we will deal with this this time round.

The obvious tone is that of celebration. We talk of a “festive season” and of “celebrating Christmas”. Parties and lavish dinners and gift giving and carol singing. Celebration is everywhere. In the aftermath of the lengthy lockdowns, many people are all the more eager to let their hair down and make this year’s Christmas get together the biggest ever.

And celebration dominates in all but one of our readings tonight. The first words we heard from the prophet Zephaniah were “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!”

Rejoice over what? Well, the prophet continues to lay out the cause for this celebration: a vision of God coming to save the people, to turn their fortunes around, humbling their enemies, ending their shame, and gathering them home in joy and safety and honour. It is a classic expression of the hopes and yearnings of God’s people in ancient times. Israel longed for the day when the Messiah would come and suffering and oppression would be banished forever and all would be well. And the prophets – Zephaniah among them – urge the people to celebrate this now. Don’t just yearn for it, but celebrate it now as a declaration of trust in God’s promise to bring it to fulfilment.

We responded to Zephaniah’s words by joining in singing the canticle from Isaiah which similarly rejoiced in this vision of the Messiah who is coming to us. “Surely it is God who saves us. We will trust God’s love and not be afraid. For the Lord is our stronghold and our sure defence, who comes to be our saviour.”

And as Christmas draws near, it shines a different light on these hopes for a messiah, a saviour. It mysteriously takes us to a manger, a humble feed trough in a stable, and invites us to recognise the fulfilment of all these hopes in a newborn baby laid there. Here is the longed for messiah. Here is the saviour for whom you have hoped and prayed. Here is your God made flesh. And in the surprise and wonder of it all, there is great cause for rejoicing, for celebrating, for festivity. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” says the Apostle Paul, “and again I will say, Rejoice.”

And rejoice we will. And rejoice and be festive others will too. Many churches will attract far bigger crowds on Christmas Eve and perhaps Christmas morning than they do at any other

time of the year. Many will gather to sing hymns of praise to the Christ child, and to joyously declare him to be the long awaited saviour of the world. Many will feel drawn to add their voices to the praise of Jesus Christ on that night, even though they have been absent and silent the rest of the year. And surely we can rejoice over that, and celebrate the news that the story of Jesus's birth still evokes something that draws so many people to bend the knee.

Or can we? I don't know about you, but I feel a bit begrudging about it. I'm not proud of it, but there is a part of me that resents these people who swan into churches for the Christmas festivities and then disappear again for another twelve months, trusting that someone else will do all the work and keep things ticking along so that there is something for them to turn up to again for one night next year. There's a part of me that resents people who start online campaigns to try to shame us into preserving church buildings that they almost never turn up to or contribute to the costs of, but think they should have a say in how we maintain it.

There's a long history of such conflicted feelings in the churches. Gilbert rang me up the other day to ask me about some of the conflicts that happened in the church in the 4th century as it navigated the transition from being a persecuted church to being a state-sponsored church. Some of those who had stood firm in their faith even under torture were none too impressed with the idea of welcoming back in those who had renounced their faith at the first threat of persecution.

It is not only in churches that you can see this. There are other contexts too. You see it among diehard football fans. There are two sorts of footy fans. There are those rusted on ones, who are paid up and there in the stands year after year, through thick and thin, cheering on their team in good times and in bad.

And then there are those who say they support the team and who keep up with the scores on the telly or in the paper, but seldom ever go to games. But then, from among them are the ones who jump on the bandwagon when the team seems to be hitting a period of real success. When their team sits on top of the ladder and is being talked of as a genuine premiership contender, suddenly they take out a membership and turn up to games, wanting to be a part of it all.

There is an ambivalent mood that can grip the long-suffering rusted on supporters when these fair-weather supporters jump on board. Ask the rusted on, old-timer Melbourne Demons fans how they feel about all the bandwagon jumpers as they surged to their long awaited premiership this year.

On the one hand they know that the club benefits from the increased membership sales and the extra numbers through the gates, but on the other hand, it just doesn't seem fair. Where were this mob in the tough times when the club needed the support all the more? How come they get to share in the gain when they haven't gone through the pain? So there is a resentment of their presumed right to join in the party when they haven't walked the walk through the ups and downs.

I sensed something of that ambivalence in the contrasting moods of the scripture passages tonight. Zephaniah, Isaiah and Paul were full of rejoicing, but from Luke's gospel, the cranky voice of John the Baptist came growling forth with a very different sound.

Who are you johnny-come-latelies? Who warned you to to flee from the wrath to come? You think you can rock up here and make your annual nod to the Almighty and be welcomed to the party with open arms? Arrghhh! Brood of vipers! Freeloaders! Fair-weather fans jumping on the bandwagon! Wake up to yourselves and start walking the walk, and we'll not take you seriously until you've proved yourself over time.

And John spells out in no uncertain terms what it will take to prove yourself. Share what you have. Don't abuse your power or influence. Give freely to those in need. Reckless generosity and love of neighbour. It is a radical change of our ways.

And the church asks us to hear this challenge each year in the lead up to Christmas, so that we might hear that growling voice warn us that bending the knee before the Christ-child is not to be taken lightly. It's easy to celebrate the birth of a gorgeous little baby, but John thunders out his warning that honouring that baby has implications when he grows up too. Singing his praises at Christmas demands something of us through the rest of the year too.

Some years ago, a young woman who was a friend of someone in our congregation came along to our Christmas Eve vigil service, and during the service I could see her looking as though she was shrinking back from it, almost physically withdrawing into herself to avoid engaging with the service.

My first thought was that our style of worship offended her, but when I spoke to her afterwards, she said she thought it was really amazing, but that she had never been in a service before where it felt like the words really mattered and that if you said them you had to be prepared to change your life and live them. And she wasn't. She wasn't willing to make those kind of changes, so she had to withdraw, to distance herself from the claim on her life.

John the Baptist would have been very pleased. That's just the sort of challenge he hopes to hammer home. Christmas should confront us all with that kind of serious demand. So I reckon John the Baptist might side with me in my somewhat begrudging attitude to those who want to flit into church at Christmas, enjoy the festivities, and then swan off again.

John might. But I'm not so sure that Jesus would. And maybe the likes of me need to be wary of assuming our disgruntlements are all justified and acceptable to God. Because elsewhere, Jesus critiques us for just such attitudes.

In this same gospel, the parable of the prodigal son is recorded, and in it Jesus exposes the simmering resentment of the older brother, and challenges us to rejoice over even those who squandered everything and contributed nothing but now come back in repentance and seek forgiveness and welcome.

And in Matthew's gospel Jesus uses the parable of the employer who keeps putting on more workers and at the end of the day pays them all the same whether they worked all day or just the last hour. He directs a piercing light at our precious assumption that we should be honoured and rewarded above those who jumped on board at the last moment.

A newborn baby knows nothing of who has worked long and hard and who has waltzed in at the last moment; who has travelled long miles to be present here, and who has just popped in from the next room. And so perhaps Jesus is calling us to accept all comers, and rejoice with

them, and see if any will stay, instead of looking askance at those who come now who were not here before.

And perhaps when John calls us, if we have two coats, to give one to someone who has none, perhaps even he could see that that might, among other things, mean giving half our credit for our long faithfulness to the one who only now comes in, feeling a little naked and unsure whether they belong. And if we can begin to draw both those strands together – the John challenge and the Jesus welcome, if you like – and begin responding to both of them, then perhaps we will truly be preparing ourselves for a real Christmas worth celebrating.