

Third Sunday of Advent, Year C

OT

Zeph 3: 14-20

One of the prophetic hymns that have found a home in Christian circles, as applying to the coming of Jesus. Underlying it is a joyful and hopeful message for all the nations. Judgement is suspended; the days of punishment are past. Relationships that were based on human notions of justice and punishment are to be transformed into relationships founded instead upon the love of God.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote thus of the notion of *ubuntu, botho* in his native language: It is difficult to render in English ... It speaks about humaneness, gentleness, hospitality, putting yourself out on behalf of others, being vulnerable. It embraces compassion and toughness. It recognises that my humanity is bound up with yours. ...

... we say "a person is a person through other persons". I would not know how to be a human at all except I learn this from other human beings.

Either Isa 12: 2-26

Another exclamation of joy, which includes clear encouragement to 'go, tell'. Don't keep the good news to yourself; make known his deeds among the nations.

Or Ps 146: 4-10

This reading is pervaded by a sense that the things that now perplex us about life, the injustices, the big question, will all be resolved. And there is, too, a topical reminder of God's insistent call for justice. The Lord is watching over the stranger in the land, watching over their care and well-being. In our tense and touchy world (note: not touchy-feely, just touchy) our watching tends sometimes to be freighted with suspicion.

Epistle Phil 4: 4-7

The note of celebration and joy (evident also in the reading from Zephaniah, above) is set out here with great vividness. The message Paul is communicating resonates with a sense that the urgent demand of the times is for gentleness. And the confidence to be that gentle – the peace of God that passes all understanding – is grounded in the relationship with God that is founded on Prayer.

Preachers may detect here a sermon outline, with a clear logical message. Let rejoicing be the mark of your demeanour; out of a joyous spirit will come gentleness – it's hard not to be gentle when you are joyful; the Lord is near, not imminent in a temporal sense, but imminent in an existential sense – the presence of the Lord is right here, right now, among you; a joyous, gentle spirit is not attuned to perpetual worrying, but rather to a trustful relationship with God

that is permeated with thankfulness, and ready to hand over to God the challenges that threaten us. That 'story' is the basis for Paul's claim that the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and minds.

Gospel Luke 3: 7-18

How to live when the chips are down! In his preaching, John was trying to bring to his people a sense of urgency. Who can imagine what it must have been like, living under Roman occupation, with limited rights and a circumscribed identity. In our time it is the mark of dictatorship, to extinguish every identity save one - our own. John's message seems to be a kind of 'holding position'; sustain the traditions of honesty and integrity which you have inherited; do not be deflected from this by any oppression from Pilate, Rome's representative, or corruption from our puppet kings.

The call of Jesus, however, is not to passive resistance, nor to any kind of *intifada*. Rather, his message is: the kingdom is near; therefore live truly, and live deeply. Go beyond the exact requirements of the law; go the extra mile, waive the debt, forgive the hurt, have nothing to do with hatred of the outcast and the stranger. It would be good to ponder exactly what we understand by that.