



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 9th December 2007
by Mark Ashton

10p

Zephaniah 1:1-18

A Day to Expect

Welcome to Zephaniah – this little known prophet, tucked away in the pages of our Old Testament, who prophesied late in the seventh century B.C. to what remained of God’s people, after the vicious Assyrian empire had destroyed the 10 Northern tribes a century earlier. There had been a bit of a lull in prophecy for many years since that time. Then God had been speaking to his people through prophets like Isaiah, Micah, Amos and Hosea. But now God spoke again through Zephaniah: *The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah* (v 1). He was probably the great-great-grandson of a good king—Hezekiah—and he prophesied during the reign of another good king—Josiah—but what a devastating message! *“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD* (v 2). Isn’t that an offensively abrupt start? And don’t we want to object—”But who has the right to sweep away everything? Who has the right?”

We know we humans have done far too much to trash and destroy the face of the earth. But we sense that we don’t have the right to do it. That is why we feel so guilty about it, about each species now threatened with extinction, about to be swept away. So who does have the right to sweep everything away?—The Giant Panda, the Bengal Tiger . . . the human race . . . ? And Zephaniah answers—

1. God has the right

vv 2-3

God has the right to do that: to remove what He has created because of our sin. But we human beings find that very hard to accept; so perhaps we

need this reminder. I was delighted to come across this in the introduction to a new book:

“There’s an idea going about that the human race basically understands how the universe works. Not you and me obviously but ‘scientists’ perhaps, or ‘experts’. Regrettably, this is not the case. In the words of Thomas Eddison, the man who didn’t invent the light bulb, ‘We don’t know a millionth of one percent about anything’ . . .”

“It’s a very well kept secret, which they don’t teach you at school, that nobody has the faintest notion what gravity is. Or consciousness, or electricity, or viruses. We don’t know why there is something and not nothing, and we do not know either how, or why, the universe began. Worse, 96% of the universe appears to be missing. The world is not solid; it is made of empty space and energy. But nobody knows what energy is, and they’re beginning to suspect there is no such thing as emptiness . . .”

Isn’t that great? I liked that so much I bought every copy off the shelves of Waterstones of **The Book of General Ignorance**, to give to our godchildren for Christmas. What a helpful reminder of our human limitations! And, if our understanding of our environment is actually much smaller than we like to suppose, how small must we be compared to the Creator of that environment! And He has the right to do what He chooses with it.

Forty years ago I was standing in a square in Montmatre in Paris with a group of English student friends, surveying the work of the local painters, when one of the artists suddenly walked up to one of his canvasses and, with a few quick strokes of his paintbrush, blurred over what had looked like a

finished picture of, I think it was, Notre Dame and the Seine, to give it a sort of surreal effect. I commented sarcastically to one of my friends, “Obviously realism isn’t selling today,” whereupon the painter spun around and said “Actually I’ve sold three already”, which rather put me in my place. (Never assume they can’t speak English!). But the artist has the right to do what he likes with what he has made. He is not answerable to me, or to you. And nor is God.

Look how this chapter will end: *In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth* (v 18b), and we need to realise that God has the right to do that. Have we faced up to that?—that, if there is a God at all, He has the right to unmake what He has made, just as a potter can change his mind about a pot he is making, and turn it from a flower vase to a chamber pot, or squish it down into nothing at all? So God can do with us. This is God’s world, and He can do what He likes with it. I wonder if we need to say that to ourselves more often in our lives? He has the right; and we don’t have an answer.

2. Humanity does not have the answer vv 4-13

In verses 4-13 Zephaniah showed how every realm of human endeavour comes under God’s judgement. Let’s work through it—follow closely in the Bible: *I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem* (v 4a). God’s own people were not safe, nor was God’s own place, Jerusalem: *I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests* (v 4b). Baal was the God of religious excitement, and of sexual freedom. He is still around today . . . under different names. *Those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host* (v 5a): and isn’t it striking what a powerful and perpetual grip astrology has on the human psyche? *Those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molech* (v 5b): syncretism, the mixing up of different religions, has a long pedigree as well. Swearing by the LORD and swearing by Molech. When we hear of a Deanery interfaith service being suggested, it is not the novel twenty-first century idea we might think. *Those who turn back from following the LORD* (v 6a): I wonder how many of us here now are cooling in our faith as years go by? *And neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him* (v 6b): that’s practical atheism,

isn’t it? . . . : not denying the existence of God, but behaving as though He does not exist. Neither seeking Him nor enquiring of Him, because He’s just irrelevant to my Christmas shopping in John Lewis.

And we have nothing to say when God comes to judge: *Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near* (v 7a). The day of the LORD is the major theme of Zephaniah. It is going to keep coming up—not so much one particular date in human history, as a continuous truth about the accountability of all human history to God’s eternal character of love and justice. *Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near* (v 7a): that day is always near, because you and I, and every human being who has ever lived, are always accountable to the God who made us. And every so often that accountability becomes terribly immediate, as God decides to draw near to judge and save. We’ll come back to this in a moment.

But let’s go on through these verses—human religion provides no safeguard for us. *The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited* (v 7b). “Hang on,” we say, “I thought we were the ones who prepared the sacrifice . . . and God received it?” But God turns our religious ideas upside-down, and all our other ideas too: Consider verses 7-11: *The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited. On the day of the LORD’s sacrifice I will punish the princes and the king’s sons and all those clad in foreign clothes. On that day I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence and deceit. “On that day,” declares the LORD, “a cry will go up from the Fish Gate, wailing from the New Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills. Wail, you who live in the market district; all your merchants will be wiped out, all who trade with silver will be ruined.* It’s not quite clear what some of the references are in this ancient Hebrew poetry. But the general thrust is quite clear: whatever the area of human endeavour, whether it is government, or business, or even religion, it has no answer to God’s judgement. It is like when the fire alarm goes at work: everybody has to go out and assemble in the car park. It does not matter how big your salary is, or how important your role in the organisation. No one is paid enough to be able to sit at their desk and ignore the fire alarm. The boss, the head teacher,

the consultant, the prof, that reclusive managing director that no one ever sees because they skulk in their office all day—when the fire alarm goes, out they go.

So when it comes to God, all our human achievements and status stand for nothing: look at verse 12, *At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent* (v 12). It is like the school caretaker going round the classrooms with a torch to check that a couple of 5th formers haven't hidden in the broom cupboard. *At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad'* (v 12). This is God's way with the human race. He will bring us to face Him. Those who pretend to be indifferent to whether He exists or not, neither hoping for His help nor fearing His disapproval ("The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad"), will find themselves accountable to a perfectly holy judge who insists we meet Him.

And at that moment all those human achievements, to which we give so much of our lives, will end in futility and frustration: *Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine* (v 13). This God does not wait for us to come searching for Him, with our pathetic attempts at religion: He comes for us, and, when He does, we find we have nothing to say: *Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near* (v 7a). God has the right, and humanity does not have an answer; so we would be wise not to question His right (to order the universe and our lives) as He chooses. We are sometimes too full of questions and arguments: when God has the right and we do not have an answer.

3. God also controls the timetable,

See how our chapter ends: *"The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. I will bring distress on*

the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD's wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth" (vv 14-18). This is the poetry of war. And war came to the Jewish nation in the Old Testament with a dreadful inevitability. But each horrid encounter they had with a foreign invading power spoke to them of God's ownership of all time and all space.

The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly (v 14) *In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth* (v 18). That moment is always near and coming quickly, because our time is not our own. We plan out our lives as if we owned the future and had a right to it. We calculate how many shopping days to Christmas and when we need to post our cards and parcels, as if we were not all travelling towards an unknown but un-missable date—when death will have its day.

In a gathering of this size it is very probable that there is someone here with a yet undetected cancer or heart condition in an advanced state that will end life prematurely. I was in Sevenoaks last night celebrating my daughter's father-in-law's recovery from open-heart surgery. He started a new job in the autumn and was called in for a routine medical. He felt completely fit, but the optometrist spotted something which caused them to have him straight into hospital for a quadruple by-pass operation. It came as a complete shock to discover he was in such a dangerous condition.

We do not know when God will bring our lives, or this world, to an end. You see in verses 15-17 the fearful action of God at the end of time is contrasted with His perceived inactivity in the middle of time. Is that a lesson for our lives? What were they saying in verse 12? *'The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.'* But look at verses 15-17 *That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned*

against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth . . . because they have sinned against the LORD. Human sin (our choosing what is bad rather than what is good) would be no more than a pity were it not that God is as He is. The intensity of His anger is the measure of how much He cares. You remember that small girl who came home from school in tears and when asked “Why?” said it was because her teacher didn’t care for her. Her mum said, “Of course, she does”, and the little girl said, “No, I know she does not care for me, she never marks my work.” Love cares, love evaluates, love acts. The opposite of love is not judgement; it is indifference. If our lives are never assessed morally, then our actions are emptied of meaning. My life becomes futile and meaningless if there is no moral accountability.

But what if there is accountability . . . to a perfectly holy God, by whose standards I will always fail? ***I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD*** (v 17a). Against the LORD: There is a standard we cannot meet. Zephaniah 1 is not a chapter of hope. That will come later in the book. Do come for the next 2 Sundays. But there are still tiny hints of hope: ***Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near. The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited*** (v 7). Our sacrifices cannot atone for our sins. But what if God has provided His own sacrifice? A substitute to die in our place? The great day of God’s wrath, when He poured it all out, was also the day He provided a substitutionary sacrifice as Jesus died in my place on the cross. He alone can provide a refuge from the punishment our sins deserve. See verses 2-3. ***“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. “I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.*** You see, if we are not alarmed by the prospect of God’s judgement, we need to be. But if we are alarmed by it, we need not to be. God Himself has provided a shelter. He can hide us from it—and so we are going to end by singing Toplady’s great hymn: ‘Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Hide me now, my refuge be’ as our response. The only way we can hide from God’s wrath is to hide in God.

Do you know what the name ‘Zephaniah’ means in Hebrew? I didn’t think you would, so let me tell you It means, ‘The LORD hides’. The only way we can flee from God is to flee to God. And be hidden by Him, from His wrath.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)