



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 23rd December 2007
by Mark Ashton

10p

Zephaniah 3:9-20

A Day of Delight

Is this a friendly universe?

If you have followed through all three of these sermons on Zephaniah, can I thank you for persevering? And, if this is your first sermon on Zephaniah, can I congratulate you on timing your arrival to perfection? I think it would be fair to say we have not been having a lot of fun so far. In fact, God's message through this little Old Testament prophet is well summed up in the sentence that immediately precedes our passage: *"The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger"* (v 8).

Zephaniah has asserted God's right to do just that—to sweep away everything He has made, if He chooses to. The Maker can unmake what He has made; He has that right. And Zephaniah has shown that there is no sphere of human endeavour, and no culture and no ethnic group which does not come under God's judgement and deserve His wrath. That is how he started his book. *"I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the LORD"* (1:2). And that is the gist of the first two and a half chapters.

But that is not how Zephaniah ends his book; for suddenly the tiny, odd glints of sunlight, which we have noticed earlier in the book, come together and the sun breaks through the clouds in the final glorious twelve verses.

Look at verses 9-13: *"Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings. On that day you will not be put to shame for all the*

wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD. The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid."

This is very different, so different that some think it can't have been written by the same person. How can it be reconciled to the end of chapter one? *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* (1:18) Compare 3:17: *The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.* How can we integrate those two conflicting perspectives?

1. The Two Sides of God's Day

But our human experience of life is like that, isn't it? The eighteenth century German writer, Lessing, said there was just one question he would want to ask of the Sphinx (which knows everything and has to tell the truth)—"is this a friendly universe?" Is everything going to turn out well in the end? Will good eventually triumph? Because it is very hard to tell at the moment, isn't it? Some things about our world and our human experience are wonderful, aren't they? And some are dreadful. And there is no obvious justice behind it all, visible to our eyes, is there? We cannot deny that. So how will the story end? How will my life end?

People like Prof Richard Dawkins find the anomalies of human experience too great to allow

the possibility that there might even be a God. The contradictions are too great. (Although I was struck to read this week that Dawkins has said in a BBC interview that he does enjoy singing Christmas Carols. Now there is a contradiction for you! And Libby Purves in the Times could not resist rewriting some of them for him: “God rest ye merry Gentlemen, pass on your DNA, For genes are strong and se-el-fish and will find out a way”...or...“Silent night, Science is right”...or...“Away in a helix, no crib for a bed, The little Lord Genome laid down its sweet head”. But that really grates—and I don’t just mean my singing—if you can call it that). And so does Zephaniah grate.

Because Zephaniah does not present us with a nice, neat solution to our human predicament. He does not present a Tinkerbell God—do you remember Tinkerbell, the fairy in Peter Pan, whose very existence depends on children’s belief in her? If the children don’t believe, she fades away. But God is not like that. Whether we believe in Him or not, He is the ultimate reality. So the difficulty we have in making sense of life is not God’s problem; it is ours.

We choose to ignore Him, if not in theory (we may not be card-carrying atheists like Richard Dawkins), then in practice (we live our daily lives with no reference to Him). We do our Christmas shopping, for example, without much reference to God. And then our life on this earth becomes an extraordinary, paradoxical mixture of good and evil, of joy and of sorrow, of the pleasant and the horrid, of the beautiful and the hideous, of the just and the unjust—so contradictory that for many it becomes meaningless: how can we ever reconcile the two extremes of human experience?

Well, Zephaniah’s answer is: by the judgement and the salvation of God. Yes—There is to be a terrible day of God’s anger. Look again at verse 8: ***“Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD, “for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger”***. We may flinch from that, but we cannot avoid it. We only reach the last twelve verses of Zephaniah through the first two and a half chapters. If we want God, He does not fit in our pocket. He’s not Tinkerbell. He comes to us in terrifying

judgement: all of us; not just those who are trying to keep Him out of our lives at the moment. We must all stand under His judgement.

If we would know His blessing have we done that?—accepted that God has the right (as our Maker) to sweep us away into hell if He chooses to; and have we acknowledged that that is what we actually deserve? (Measured against one another we may do O.K., but not against His perfect standard of how we should live). Perhaps we did do that once, at some past experience of conversion. But do we still live that way now? Did we get up this morning and confess our sins? When did we last (other than at a church service)? We need to, you know.

If we want these last twelve verses of Zephaniah to begin to become a reality for us, then we must first let the first two and a half chapters speak to us. We each need to bow our heads before God’s judgement, and say “So be it”. We have to accept the whole message, because God’s day (***the great day of the LORD*** (1:14)) is double-sided and hope only has the last word, not the first.

But the God of creation will not let His universe be finally wrenched from His hand by the rebellion of the human race. Your selfishness, and my selfishness, is not actually going to spoil it. And it is the cross of Jesus Christ which supremely tells us that. It tells us the price God had to pay. And it is an awful sight, isn’t it? In the evangelical tradition we prefer the bare cross to the crucifix (with the figure of the crucified Jesus still suspended upon it—and perhaps rightly, because the story did not end there, and because Christ’s physical sufferings were only one small aspect of His passion). But Jesus on the cross is where we see God’s wrath, isn’t it? That is how I know how much God hates my sin and how much He loves me—because He did that to His own beloved Son, in order to forgive me.

So it is only the cross (the death of Jesus in my place for my sins) that unlocks the strange paradox at the heart of Zephaniah, how the day of God’s wrath can also be the day of His mercy:

‘At the cross of Jesus, Pardon is complete, love and justice mingle, truth and mercy meet. Though my sins condemn me, Jesus died instead. There is full forgiveness, in the blood he shed’.

So let’s now consider that mercy—

2. What is promised to us?

Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder (v 9). Pure lips indicate a purified heart—the sort of heart that communicates with God.

From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings (v 10). The headwaters of the Nile represented the limits of the known world for Zephaniah's contemporaries, just as we hear today of gospel work on every continent of the globe.

On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill (v 11). No shame over how I have treated God, because He will have dealt with the cause, our pride. In a room full of cobwebs, you need to deal with the spiders. In a life like mine, God needs to deal with how I exalt myself.

But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD (v 12). Not the weak and pathetic but those who have learnt to depend entirely on God; And who are becoming like God—*The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths* (v 13): glance left on the Bible page to the next column. *The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong* (3:5). It is a great promise, isn't it? *The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid* (3:13).

The removal of fear—*Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp"* (vv 14-16). Do you remember when the birth of Jesus was being announced at the beginning of the New Testament, and Zechariah sang of how Jesus would rescue us from the hand of our enemies 'to serve Him without fear'? There

is all the difference in the world between serving out of fear of punishment, and serving out of gratitude for salvation. Because *The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing* (v 17). He is a singing God, you know! He will quiet you with His love: no more questions, no more rebuking God, berating Him, putting Him in the dock, arguing with Him, once we know His love fully: *He will quiet you with His love.*

And the promises escalate in the last three verses. *"The sorrows for the appointed feasts I will remove from you; they are a burden and a reproach to you"* (v 18). The Hebrew is a bit obscure, but meaningful worship will be restored and all our hypocrisy will be done away with.

"At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame. At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the LORD (vv 19-20). The images throughout are corporate, plural, but it is clearly a work that must begin in the heart of each individual involved.

That's where the Christian message is so special: it alone, among all the grand schemes today to save our planet and to change the human race, starts by getting to the root of the problem and changing the human heart. If you want to stop a plague, you have to immunise individuals. If you want to change the world, start changing hearts. That is why this gathering in this building now (and the other church services in the city today) are the most radical and the most hopeful of all the schools of thought and programmes of reform represented in Cambridge in the first decade of the twenty first century . . . Because only God can do it. Only God can change the human heart.

You see, God is the sole agent of all this. He is the subject of eight different verbs in the last three verses. Sometimes you see a property for sale with the details of some Real Estate Agent company displayed on a board outside the property, and the words 'Sole Agent' underneath. 'Sole Agent': and you know, if you want that property, you have to go to that company. You can't get it anywhere

else. God is the sole agent of these promises. There is nowhere else we can ultimately go to get rid of our shame and to get rid of our fear, and to know His love: ***“On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill”*** (v 11).

3. But when will this be?

When will this be? Like that other passage Tessa read to us from Revelation 21, is this a wonderful promise of how things will one day be, after my death, or at the end of time? Or does it have any relevance for today?

Well, it is a picture of the impact of God upon the life of human beings. Notice the specific time frame: verse 9—**Then**, verse 11—**on that day**, verse 16—**on that day**, verse 19—**at that time** and verse 20—**at that time, . . . at that time**. I said in an earlier sermon that the great ‘Day of the LORD’ theme in Zephaniah concerns not so much particular dates in human history, as a continuous truth about the accountability of all human history to God’s eternal character of love and justice. At particular points God breaks in upon the history of races and individuals to bring them face-to-face with Himself; and every specific encounter like that points on to the ultimate end of all things. So, if you and I have encountered God and come to know Him through Jesus, these things have begun to happen for us.

Do you remember that wonderful moment in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe when Narnia, which had been locked in winter for years (without number), suddenly began to experience a thaw? It had always been winter, but never Christmas. Then Father Christmas appears . . . and the ice starts to melt.

Well, in your and my life if we are believers, the thaw has begun. Or to put it another way it is not Christmas . . . but it is nearly Christmas. Have you noticed the beginning of the thaw in you, if you are a believer?

Please look at verse 9 again: ***“Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder”***. I was converted in the February of 1968. I was not a monster of depravity, but I was

arrogant and selfish and spoilt, and I had a very foul tongue. I quickly realised that Christians did not swear and blaspheme, and, if I wanted my speech to please God, I had better stop. But I could not. I tried my hardest in the months that followed. I even tried fining myself for every obscenity and profanity that came out of my mouth. But nothing changed, and I eventually decided that summer, that, although Christians did not swear, I was going to be the first one that did.

And I just let the matter drop. I stopped thinking about, or trying to clean up my language. I could do no more. And then one day that autumn I realised that I’d stopped. Or rather that God had stopped me. He had taken it away from me. What I could not do, He had done. What does He say in verse 9? ***“Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD”***. Now that’s just a personal example, forgive me for it; but in such small ways, the thaw has begun in the life of the believer. Have you noticed it? A deeper conviction of sin, a greater sensitivity to the things of God. It is not Christmas yet. But Christmas is coming: we will soon be there.

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