

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/

© Chris Haslam

Zephaniah 3:14-20

NRSV

Earlier in the chapter, the author has spoken of Jerusalem (her inhabitants) and their crimes: they have failed to listen to God, accept his advice, trust in him and *draw near* (v. 2) to him. He has destroyed other nations as a warning to Jerusalem, but she has ignored it (vv. 6-7). In spite of this, he will cause Gentiles to turn to his ways (v. 9); they will serve him by permitting the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem (v. 10). When God does rise (“on that day”, v. 11, in an ideal future time), he will bring about Jerusalem’s moral recovery by removing the arrogant from their midst (v. 12), leaving as “the remnant” (v. 13), the “humble and lowly” (v. 12), who will be godly; they will live in tranquillity.

Now the author (or perhaps a later editor) invites Jerusalem to rejoice because her salvation is about to happen. God has intervened (v. 15); he dwells with his people; he protects them. In a military image, God will lead Israel’s army. He will encourage her people (v. 16); he will give them victory, rejoice in their return to his ways, make his love for them apparent again, and celebrate in song. As people expected to happen at the end of time, God will destroy Jerusalem’s (and Judah’s) enemies, look after those who suffer, bring the exiles home, and make the city to be honoured by all (v. 19). They will see Judah’s fortunes restored! (v. 20).

Isaiah 12:2-6

NRSV

This passage is in a similar vein to our reading from Zephaniah. V. 1 and v. 4 begin “... in that day”; 11:10 says “On that day” other nations will note that a king of David’s line (“the root of Jesse”) sits on Israel’s throne; they will ask about him and the divine glory that is with him. “On that day”, says 11:11, God will gather the remnant, the remaining faithful, from throughout the world. So the *day* is the end of the era, when the Messiah will come. “You” (12:1) is singular, so perhaps God instructs a herald of events to come. He will tell the people to give thanks for the end of God’s anger and return to his *comfort*. Perhaps metaphorically, “salvation” in v. 2 and v. 3 is restoration to the Promised Land: note “wells of salvation”. God’s “strength and ... might” (v. 2) will protect his people. Life-giving water symbolizes God’s saving power. In a second song (vv. 4-6), the people not only give thanks but also proclaim the good news to all nations: that all may know of him and his actions. His people are inhabitants of “Zion” (v. 6), “royal” because God, “the Holy One of Israel” dwells there.

Philippians 4:4-7

NRSV

Paul began the conclusion to the letter back in 3:1a. After a digression – to warn against heresy and self-indulgence and to urge devotion to Christ – he tries to finish the letter, but certain concerns intrude. It seems that “Euodia” (v. 2) and “Syn-

tyche”, two workers for Christ, differ in their understanding of what the way of Christ is, and that this is causing disunity in the Philippian community. We do not know to whom Paul refers as his “loyal companion” (v. 3); he is asked to be instrumental in achieving reconciliation.

V. 4 is the conventional Greek salutation (like our *goodbye*) but here Paul means “rejoice” literally. May you behave towards others as you should (“gentleness”, v. 5). Paul expects the Second Coming soon: “The Lord is near.” Then v. 6: rather than worrying on their own, the Philippians should ask God to help them, through prayer, both in prayers of “supplication” (petition) and of “thanksgiving”. God’s “peace” (v. 7) will protect them against their own failings and external threats. It “surpasses all understanding” either by being beyond the grasp of the human mind or by achieving more than we can conceive.

Luke 3:7-18

NRSV

Luke has told us that “... the word of God came to John ... in the wilderness. He went into all the region ... proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ...” (vv. 2-3). Now John the Baptist addresses people in general (“crowds”, v. 7): he calls them “vipers” (poisonous snakes common in Judea), and accuses them of being baptised with no intention of starting a new, ethical, life. If they think that by being baptised they will evade God’s judgement at the end of the era (“wrath to come”, v. 7), they are wrong: they must also turn to godliness. Being Jewish, having “Abraham as our ancestor” (v. 8) is no assurance of salvation, for anyone who responds to God’s gift of love with appropriate behaviour will be part of the renewed Israel. The people have a choice (v. 9): either respond to God’s offer by beginning a new way of living, or face condemnation at the end of time. (Here “fire” symbolizes adverse judgement.) God will fulfil his promises to Abraham in unexpected ways! Luke gives us three examples of behaviour which fit with turning over a new leaf. The “crowds” (v. 10) are probably ordinary people; they should have selfless concern for the disadvantaged. In spite of attempted reforms, “tax collectors” (v. 12) still collected more than prescribed. The “soldiers” (v. 14) were probably Jews in the service of Herod Antipas; they too were despised. John tells them that they should follow the emperor’s guidelines on military conduct. That “What should we do?” is answered here and elsewhere in various ways probably indicates that simply following rules is inadequate: we must ask again and again in openness to God’s will.

At the time, people expected the Messiah to come at any moment (v. 15): perhaps John would restore Israel’s fortunes and God’s power would triumph now. John says that the baptism he offers is vastly inferior to Jesus’ baptism: for Jesus, he is so unworthy that he cannot even do a slave’s task (“untie ...”, v. 16). (In Acts 2:3, fire is associated with the Holy Spirit.) V. 17 says, in agricultural language, that the godly (“wheat”) will be gathered to Christ but the ungodly (“chaff”) will be destroyed. John preached a message of forgiveness of sins and the advent of a new relationship between people and God.