

Joy, repentance, and the Good News – of the coming Christ

Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18a

Today is the third Sunday in Advent, and so, having in previous weeks lit the ‘Hope’ and ‘Preparation’ candles, today we have lit the third candle known as the ‘Joy Candle’.

Appropriately enough, our first two readings focus on the amazing *joy* experienced by God’s people as they celebrate God’s *goodness* in their lives, brought about through the long expected Messiah. This joy, of course, is what the Jewish nation called God’s *shalom*, and in John’s Gospel is termed the “abundant life”.¹

But what is the nature of this abundant life? What kind of joy is this? What is meant here by “*joy*”?

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Zephaniah prophesied to Judah, the remnant people of God. As such they were hanging onto the promises of God by the skin of their teeth. Hezekiah, the reforming king of Judah, was Zephaniah’s great-great-grandfather. “The precise relationship of Zephaniah to the reforms of Josiah [isn’t clear]. If Zephaniah preached after the reforms of Josiah, it appears that these reforms did not change society completely. Social injustice was widespread,² and luxury was enjoyed by some through oppressing the poor.³ Remnants of pagan worship were still present, and “high places” [of sacrifice] flourished.⁴ Duplicity and syncretism were reflected in the recognition of both the Lord and Molech.^{5”} ⁶

¹ John 10:10.

² Zeph.3:1, 3, 7.

³ Zeph. 1:8-9.

⁴ Zeph.1:4-5

⁵ Zeph. 1:5.

⁶ Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Zondervan Reference Software. Serach – Zephaniah/introduction/Religious background.

Against this backdrop, the prophecy of Zephaniah envisions the coming of the Christ as a time of judgement but also of deliverance for the faithful. God's and purposes and promises would not be frustrated.

Our excerpt from Zephaniah's prophecy pictures this deliverance as a time of great joy for the people of God marked by feasting and carousing.⁷ A more sedate kind of joy is described in our reading from Philippians – a kind of joy we religious folks are perhaps more comfortable with (or profess to be).

Yet, it is Zephaniah's vision that is picked up by John in his Gospel. John pictures the coming reign of God as a wedding party where, having got drunk on rough village red, Jesus supplies the guests with roughly 600 litres of premium wine.⁸

Typically weddings went on for days and involved all the extended family and villagers from both sides.⁹ John references Jesus turning up to such a party on "the third day".¹⁰ The allusions here to the work of Christ are undeniable even if ribald. "Ritual water becomes the Gospel wine of the blood of Christ".

Yet this isn't just John's spin on things nor a useful, if over-done, parable to make a theological point. The Gospel tradition around eating and drinking and over-done hospitality is strong. For instance, we also find the wedding banquet featuring in Luke's Gospel as a picture of what the coming of Christ into our world is like – Luke 14:715-24.¹¹

Again, earlier in Luke's Gospel we hear the very serious and pious Pharisees chide Jesus:

"John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."

⁷ Zephaniah 3:18a.

⁸ John 2:10;

⁹ http://www.oasistradepost.com/Weddings_/weddings_.html

¹⁰ John 2:1.

¹¹ (and preceding).

Jesus replied:

“Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?”¹²

So the sort of joy Jesus was known for was a very *earthy* kind of joy. Jesus was known as a “good times” kind of rabbi. In both his teaching and behaviour he made the message clear: when God is *present*, there is *too much* of everything.

Maybe the Kiwi ideal of Christmas isn't so far off the mark then(?). With Christmas just a week and a half away many will have gone to parties at work (or are planning to this week), and will also be looking forward to the big day itself when families re-unite, presents are exchanged, the bubbly is popped, the beer swirls, the ham is carved, the pav is woofed down and we over-eat ourselves into an afternoon nap.

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With all this as backdrop, our Gospel reading is timely. Advent is a joyful time – in every sense of that word. Yet it is also a *penitential* season.

Our Gospel finishes by telling us: “So with many other exhortations, [John] proclaimed the *good news* to the people”.¹³ The preceding verses paint a strange picture (to our ears, at least), of what this “good news” is. Earlier Luke tells us “[John] went into all the region around Jordan (the promised land), proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”.¹⁴

The people ask, “what then should we do?”.¹⁵ John tells the people in no uncertain terms that if they want to know the presence of God in their lives they need to whole-heartedly turn to God and show this through “fruits worthy of repentance”.¹⁶

¹² Luke 5:33-34. Also see from Luke 5:27 through to 6:1 where there is lots of eating and drinking and hospitality.

¹³ Luke 3:18a.

¹⁴ Luke 3:3.

¹⁵ Luke 3:10.

¹⁶ Luke 3:8.

Different groups of people come back at him on this – shifty “tax collectors” (the quislings of Jewish society), some Roman soldiers, the masses in general. Each repeats the question, “what should we do?” Though John answers specifically to each group, his reply is basically the same each time. “You want God’s shalom. Then repent! And show it through how you live.”

There’s a flip side to this as well. Whilst repentance brings forgiveness. Non-repentance brings judgement.

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This is not a palatable message in today’s society (if it ever has been). But it’s an important one and, in fact, it’s the most important message we can proclaim in these needy and uncertain times.

I want to develop this theme more fully next week as I come back to this Gospel reading. I want to assert clearly and strongly, that the way to joy is through repentance and this *is* good news to a generation lost in sin and desperate for something good!

There is a challenge in this for us... If we don’t know this to be true in our own lives, we cannot expect others to either.