

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Zephaniah 3:14-18; Canticle Is 12; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire

Luke 3:10 And the crowds asked John, “What then should we do?” 11 In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” 13 He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” 14 Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

Luke 3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, “I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Luke 3:18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Luke gives a more extended summary of the preaching of the Baptist, a measure of his continued significance (see New Testament foreground below). Cf. Luke 3:1-9.

In Luke, the birth narratives of John and Jesus are designed to “sort” the relationship between the two. However, continued anxiety is apparent in Luke’s extraordinary editorial move in removing the Baptist from the scene of the baptism: *But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that*



Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison. Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:19–22)

KIND OF WRITING

It is a summary statement of John’s preaching, confirmed in Josephus’ account. The clear distinction between John and Jesus was needed both at the time of writing and later.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

What should we do?

These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord. (Zechariah 8:16–17)

Baptism of Fire

On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. Whoever

Thought for the day

“What then should we do?” is both obvious and pertinent. In the maelstrom of life, it is good to stand back and discern what is being asked of me in the many contexts of life: family member, spouse, parent, disciple, leader, pastor, evangeliser and so forth. In these different roles, how should I be, what should I do so as to enable others too to fulfil their own callings, as family member, spouse etc. As in the teaching of John the Baptist, our responses are authentic only if they are practical, down-to-earth and real.

Prayer

Help me, Lord, to recognise in the everyday what you desire of me. Help me to see what are the practical steps I can take from today onwards so as to be a better disciple of your son, Jesus, the coming one, whom John proclaims today to all who would listen.

is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. (Isaiah 4:2–5)

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. (Malachi 4:1)

Harvest symbolism

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (Psalms 1:3–4)

I have winnowed them with a winnow-

ing fork in the gates of the land; I have bereaved them, I have destroyed my people; they did not turn from their ways. (Jeremiah 15:7)

Expectations (extra-biblical)

And he will be a righteous king over them, taught by God. There will be no unrighteousness among them in his days, for all shall be holy, and their king shall be the Lord Messiah. (PsSol 17:32)

May God cleanse Israel for the day of mercy in blessing, for the appointed day when his Messiah will reign. (which will be) under the rod of discipline of the Lord Messiah, in the fear of his God, in wisdom of spirit, and of righteousness and of strength." (PsSol 18:5, 7)

Good news - an expression from Second and Third Isaiah

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" (Isaiah 40:9; cf Is 52:7)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Isaiah 61:1-2)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

He answered them, "I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" They discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet." (Luke 20:3-6)

He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. (Acts 18:25)

Then he said, "Into what then were you baptised?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." (Acts 19:3-4)

ST PAUL

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another

has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 10 These questions are in Luke only and the message is addressed to the crowds, that is, the people as such, and not just to their leaders. A life of practical conversion of heart, leading to real service of the neighbour is what John has in mind.

Verse 11 Looking out for the poor is part of Old Testament piety: Is 1:10-20; 58:6-7 and many other texts. At Luke's stage in the evolution of Christianity, disciples looked forward urgently to a reversal of oppressive social conditions.

Verse 12 As is well known, tax collectors were mostly likely fellow Jews who worked for the Empire and were regarded as traitors and were well known for corrupt practices.

Verse 13 This verse acknowledges the corrupt practices of the tax/toll collectors.

Verse 14 Soldiers, too, could have included Jews, in the service of Herod Antipas. This teaching of John is confirmed in the writings of Josephus.

Verse 15 Some clearly did regard John as the Messiah. He himself seems to have been clear that he was not. However, what he did expect is not so clear: God himself perhaps, or an angel, or the Messiah, or a Moses-type prophet.

Verse 16 John distinguishes himself from the Messiah in three ways. (i) The messiah will be someone "more powerful." (ii) John uses as a metaphor the humblest task of the lowest servant. (iii) There will be a different kind of baptism. It may well be that originally the image was simpler: wind (*pneuma*, also spirit) and fire, that is, elements associated with harvest (see the next verse). The Christian reception of the image, however, reads *pneuma* to mean Spirit, to which the label "holy" is given so that it now refers to the Holy Spirit in baptism. In turn, then, the Holy Spirit has a large presence and role in Luke-Acts (Luke 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-26; 3:16, 22; 4:1; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12; Acts 1:2, 5, 8, 16; 2:4, 33, 38; 4:8, 25, 31; 5:3, 32; 6:5;

7:51, and so forth).

Verse 17 This is the traditional image of harvest for the end of time. When harvest does come around, it is time to examine the quality of the crop and so it easily becomes a metaphor of judgement, for instance in Psalm 1 above. The image comes from farming practice: the whole mixture was thrown into the air and the wind blew the chaff aside, while the grain landed. The chaff was then burned. Of course, the fire at a harvest was not unquenchable. This points us in the direction of final judgement.

Cf. And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. (Isaiah 66:24)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. "What should we do?" The common thread in John's answers was to encourage his questioners to be other-centred rather than self-centred, each in the context of their own circumstances. In your experience what difference has it made for you when you changed your attitude in this way?

2. John told the people in a direct and honest way what they should do. Perhaps you have had friends who did not beat about the bush but have told you honestly what they thought about your behaviour when you asked them? In gratitude recall such friends.

3. The humility of John comes out in this passage, happy to acknowledge that he only had a minor role to play in relation to the Messiah. At the same time he was enthused by his mission to "proclaim the good news to the people." What difference has it made for you when you were able to see the good in yourself, and use your gifts without having to score by portraying yourself as greater than someone else?

PRAYER

Almighty God, you sent your Son into a world where the wheat must be winnowed from the chaff and evil clings even to what is good. Let the fire of your Spirit purge us of greed and deceit, so that, purified, we may find our peace in you and you may delight in us.

Grant this through him whose coming is certain, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, Rejoice!

Phil 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Faith today can be rather anguished and it may very well be that the very word we need is to rejoice. It is easy to fall victim to the conventional view and deny ourselves access to really happiness in believing. Paul was a happy man and it may be that his word of joy is the very thing we find hardest and yet most need.

KIND OF WRITING

Our passage comes from the conclusion in the letter, where Paul is exhorting them to happiness in believing.

(*Letter opening*, 1:1-2)
Introduction, 1:3-11.
Situation, 1:12-26.
Thesis, 1:27-30.
Proof, 2:1-3:19.

First development, 2:1-18.

Second development, 2:19-3:1a.

Third development, 3:1b-19.

Conclusion, 3:20-4:20.

(*Letter closing*, 4:21-23)

Paul often concludes his teaching with a kind of “spitfire” or staccato exhortation, as here. Another good illustration would be 1 Thess 6:16-22 (see below).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

For introductory observations on the context in Philippi, see last week's notes.

At this stage, Paul was under arrest. The Philippians learned of his imprisonment and they sent Epaphroditus with a gift to deliver to Paul. Epaphroditus fell seriously ill on his way to Paul and nearly died. The Philippians learned of Epaphroditus' illness and became concerned. Epaphroditus recovered, completed his journey to Paul, and delivered the gift. Epaphroditus then learned of the Philippians' anxiety for him and he, in his turn, became distressed on account of them. Paul sent Epaphroditus back to Philippi with a letter in which he

commended Epaphroditus, thanked the Philippians for their gift, warned them about false teachers, and informed them about his own circumstances and plans.

RELATED PASSAGES

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? (1 Thess 3:9)

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thess 5:16-22)

What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. (Phil 1:18)

But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me. (Phil 2:17-18)

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. (Phil 3:1)

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Gal 5:22-23)

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. (Rom 12:12-15)

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 4 The rejoicing is to be done “in the Lord,” that is, as part of our believing and not mere natural effervescence.

Verse 5 The translation “gentleness” for *epieikēs* is perhaps a little weak. The Jerusalem Bible in the lectionary has

“tolerance” but it is rather more proactive than tolerance and more robust than gentleness. Other uses of both *epieikēs* and *epieikeia* with related synonyms in the New Testament may help: But, to detain you no further, I beg you to hear us briefly with your *customary graciousness*. (Acts 24:4) I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the *meekness* and *gentleness* of Christ (2Corinthians 10:1) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, *gentle, willing to yield*, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. (James 3:17) Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are *kind* and *gentle* but also those who are harsh. (1Peter 2:18) The NEB has *magnanimity*, which is quite good.

The sudden affirmation that the Lord is near seems to stem from the previous “always” and lead to the next verse. Cf. *But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.* (Philippians 3:20)

Verse 6 Paul resembles here the teaching in Matthew 6:25-34 (or is it the other way around?). Thanksgiving is always very much part of Paul's prayer, even when interceding.

Verse 7 Peace, in this context, is again very proactive and robust. It takes us well beyond absence of conflict to total well-being and a life-attitude which comes from Christ himself. Of the many references to peace in Paul's letters, perhaps one will suffice to illustrate: *To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.* (Romans 8:6; cf. Rom 1:7; 2:10; 3:17; 5:1; 8:6; 14:17, 19; 15:13, 33; 16:20; 1 Cor 1:3; 7:15; 14:33; 16:11; 2 Cor 1:2; 13:11; Gal 1:3; 5:22; 6:16; Phil 1:2; 4:7, 9; 1 Thess 1:1; 5:3, 23; Phlm 1:3).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Is joy really part of my believing? Would anyone be able to tell?
2. Where in my own life to I need that peace which comes from God alone?
3. For what should I now give thanks? Is being thankful part of who I am?

PRAYER

Loving God you read our hearts and know us better than we know ourselves. Open our hearts to the peace which you alone can give. Let us have that joy in believing which will strengthen our faith in you and confirm our witness to you, the source of all that is good. Amen.

Shout for joy, Daughter Zion. Shout out, Israel!

Zeph 3:14 Shout for joy, Daughter Zion
Shout out, Israel!
Be happy and boast with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

15 The LORD has removed the judgment against you;
he has turned back your enemy.
Israel's king, the LORD, is in your midst!
You no longer need to fear disaster.

16 On that day they will say to Jerusalem,
"Don't be afraid, Zion!
Your hands must not be paralysed from panic!"

17 The LORD your God is in your midst;
he is a warrior who can deliver.
He takes great delight in you;
he renews you by his love;
he shouts for joy over you."

18 "As for those who grieve because they cannot attend the festivals—
I took them away from you;
they became tribute and were a source of shame to you.

19 *Look, at that time I will deal with those who mistreated you.
I will rescue the lame sheep
and gather together the scattered sheep.
I will take away their humiliation
and make the whole earth admire and respect them.*

20 *At that time I will lead you—
at the time I gather you together.
Be sure of this!
I will make all the nations of the earth respect and admire you
when you see me restore you," says the LORD.*

v. 17 He will exult with joy over you, he will renew you by his love; he will dance with shouts of joy for you v. 18a as on a day of festival.
Jerusalem Bible (lectionary)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The short book of Zephaniah (only three chapters) was written at a very interesting time. This otherwise unknown prophet worked in Jerusalem when Josiah was king (640-609 BC). The northern kingdom was already under Assyrian rule and the southern kingdom was about to fall under their control. Even so, the ruling classes in Jerusalem, including the priests, had compromised ahead of time with Assyrian culture and religion. Zephaniah excoriates this accommodation with its inevitable idolatry and syncretism. His great theme is the Day of the Lord, a day of calamity and judgment which will lead to a purified remnant. Parts seem to be post-exilic, as we shall see.

KIND OF WRITING

The speeches of Zephaniah are highly rhetorical, aimed at the "humble in the land" and designed to evoke from them a response. By seeking God the humble may escape the coming judgment and be spared so as to enjoy the purified Jerusalem. Faith and hope will eventually lead to joy. It assumes 3:8-13 has happened.

The writing is poetry. It achieves its effects by (i) parallelism; (ii) repetition of key phrases; (iii) the emotional contrast with the preceding material.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book has the following straight-forward structure:

Title (1:1)
Judgment (1:2-6)
Exhortation to silence (1:7-18)
Exhortation to seek YHWH (2:1-3:7)
Exhortation to wait (3:8-13)
Exhortation to rejoice (3:14-20)

The book starts with a judgment over all creation (1:2-6, a *tour de force* which reverses Genesis) and closes with a celebration in a restored Jerusalem, where the exiles have returned as a remnant (3:14-12). Our reading, therefore, is the very last section of the book (the remaining verses have been added here for completeness' sake).

RELATED PASSAGES

Many texts would illustrate. For limits of space cf. Zech 23:10; 9:9; Is 54:4; 62:5; Amos 9:14-15.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 A public celebration of the return and purification. The community in Jerusalem is addressed. The grounds for such uninhibited rejoicing are given in the next verse: God's presence.

Verse 15 The punishment has been reversed. Notice that now the Lord is king. In the midst: cf. *God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.* (Psalms 46:5)

Verse 16 The day is no longer the day of judgement but the day of liberation. "Do not be afraid" is said to very many people in the Bible (e.g. Gen 15:1; 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 43:23; 46:3; 50:19; Exod 14:13; 20:20, illustrating from only Genesis and Exodus).

Verse 17-18a "The Lord is in your midst" is repeated from v. 15. Hence the profound feeling of security. The martial imagery yields to nuptial language (see Is 62:5 above) that is, God protects because of his love. Notice that God is said to shout, in response to Israel's shout of joy. It may, of course, seem appealing that the Lord should dance, but not all translators agree. See the Jerusalem Bible above.

Verse 18bc This extremely difficult verse in Hebrew (not in the excerpt to be read) is resolved rather breezily in the Jerusalem Bible (see box). In any case here are some alternatives: "*As for those who grieve because they cannot attend the festivals— I took them away from you; they became tribute and were a source of shame to you.*" (Zephaniah 3:18 NET); *He will soothe with His love Those long disconsolate. I will take away from you the woe Over which you endured mockery.* (Zephaniah 3:17-18 JPS) *He will dance with shouts of joy for you, on a day of festival. I have taken away your misfortune, no longer need you bear the disgrace of it.* (Zephaniah 3:17-18 NJB)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. When have I felt happiness in believing, real joy on account of the faith?
2. Do not be afraid: these days do we resist easy reassurance even in faith (optimism)?

PRAYER

God of all joy, you delight in each one of us and we thank you from our hearts, for your great love. May the joy of believing in you help us to be bearers of your truly Good News in our world today.

THE LITURGY

Zephaniah 3:14-18; Canticle Is 12; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

READINGS 1 AND 3

Given the special arrangements for the Advent readings, the link between the Zephaniah and Luke is not so clear. However, the joy proclaimed by the prophet captures the mood of anticipation, on the cusp of the arrival of God's Messiah

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The responsorial psalm is a canticle from Isaiah 12 and picks up perfectly the tone of unrestrained joy. *Gaudete* is the unmistakable message.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Zephaniah 3:14-18

Happiness is a wonderful thing. Happiness in believing is *also* wonderful and today's reading describes why faith and being joyful go together.

Second Reading

Philippians 4:4-7

This short reading is remarkable. Paul is now an old man, under house arrest and facing probable death. So how does he feel? Let him tell you himself.

Gospel

Luke 3:10-18

People around John the Baptist were on the lookout for signs of God's presence. They also wondered how to prepare... not a bad question to ask oneself before Christmas.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 16 December

Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17

Balaam was a prophet in Moab. When the king of Moab tried to get him to curse Israel, he uttered instead a remarkable blessing. The last lines speak of a star and a sceptre, symbols of the coming Messiah, picked up in Matthew 1-2.

Matthew 21:23-27

Jesus counters a trick question and yet it is obvious that he think John the Baptist

came from God.

In these final days leading up to the feast of Christmas, the readings are very carefully chosen. They provide a very rich biblical tapestry against which it is possible to understand the teaching offered in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2.

Tuesday 17 December

Genesis 49:2, 8-10

The great patriarch Jacob is about to die and he gathers his sons around him for a final blessing. The blessing to Judah (= son, tribe and tribal area) includes a reference to the sceptre—pointing to the much later Davidic dynasty.

God's fidelity to David's line is fulfilled in Jesus. It thus prepares for the Gospel, which is the genealogy in Matthew.

Matthew 1:1-17

The genealogy locates Jesus in real time with real people, warts and all. Neither the men nor the women were particularly moral—think only of David and the wife of Uriah. Matthew 1:1-17 is a kind of Gospel in miniature: God writing straight with crooked human lines. The figures in the last two generations are consciously ambiguous: Jacob and his son Joseph, evoking the earlier father and son.

Wednesday 18 December

St Flannan, bishop

Jeremiah 23:5-8

The oracle cited here has its historical place in the Exile (as is very clear from the reading itself). But the real reason for the choice lies in the first couple of verses, which underline God's faithfulness to David and his offspring. This prepares directly for the Gospel.

Matthew 1:18-24

This passage continues where yesterday's left off. God-with-us—Emmanuel—reminds us of God's word to Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Jeremiah and so forth. Also to us, if we reflect back.

Thursday 19 December

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25

The birth stories of Jesus in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 often echo highly signifi-

cant accounts in the Old Testament. Today's reading from Judges is an example: an annunciation to a woman who is childless. There is even a similarity between the word *nazirite* (a kind of prophet) and Nazareth (or Nazarene).

Luke 1:5-25

Our Gospel is also an annunciation but this time to a childless father, to Zechariah the priest who is to become the father of John the Baptist.

Friday 20 December

St Fachanan, bishop

Isaiah 7:10-14

This passage from Isaiah is explicitly cited in Matthew's account of the annunciation to Joseph in a dream.

Luke 1:26-38

The annunciation to Mary (the fourth in our sequence) matches the pattern of Old Testament annunciation scenes and then, significantly, breaks it. Mary is open to God's call.

Tuesday 21 December

St Peter Canisius, priest and doctor

Song of Songs 2:8-14

You may be surprised to hear in Advent a reading often used at weddings. It is however very suitable for two reasons. (1) Love is the 'reason for the season' as they say. (2) Like the lover bounding over the hills, Mary in the Gospel travels across the hill country to visit Elizabeth, her cousin.

or: *Zephaniah 3:14-18*

This delightful reading already appeared on the third Sunday of Advent this year. Being such a ringing invitation to rejoice, it is good to hear it again. The image of God dancing for joy is, perhaps, not so usual among us!!

Luke 1:39-45

Luke joins his two strands of narrative in this encounter between the two mothers. We notice the deep things said about Jesus before his birth.