

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Advent

The Text: Zephaniah 3:14-20

The third Sunday of Advent traditionally has a focus on joy. We wait in joyful expectation of Christmas where again we celebrate the birth of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ. When we reflect on our lives, yes, we have times of joy, but we also have times where we are anxious, and find it hard to have joy. All the plans for our future involve things that we expect will bring great joy in our lives. Yet, some of you may be anxious about what the future holds for you. Are you worried about your future? Are you worried about your children's future, your grand-children's future? People form and take part in protest rallies about what they feel needs to change now, because they feel the future world will go through radical changes and radical weather events if something isn't done now or there won't be much joy about.

While it is good to prepare for our future and our children's future in this world, wouldn't it be great if everyone was also concerned about their eternal future?

Today's Gospel reading causes us to stop and think about our eternal future. There is a warning to take notice of. The coming of the Day of the Lord demands repentance and humility. What does that look like in our lives? The answer is simply to bear fruits that reveal a repentant heart. Show by your outward actions that you are grateful that God is patient with you, slow to anger and abounding in everlasting love. Rather than give you and me what we deserve because of our sin and rebellious attitudes, God still finds joy in loving us.

In the reading from Zephaniah, he gives reasons for great joy and jubilation.

First, we rejoice because we have been forgiven. In verses 14-15 Zephaniah says, “Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.”

Imagine yourself in a courtroom to hear your sentence passed by a judge. There is no doubt about your guilt, and over your head hangs the probability of a penalty that will affect the rest of your life. You take your place in the dock and wait for the judgement. Then to your absolute amazement the judge says, “A royal pardon for this crime has been received. You are free to go, and your record is clear”. That is what God says to us. He gives us a royal pardon, saying the debt has been paid in full, and sets us free.

Second, we rejoice because God lives among us (verses 15-17a): 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, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, God is not a far-off God who doesn’t care. No, God is Immanuel; “God with us”.

The promise that God was in their midst was of great importance to the people of Israel. If God was there amid his people, they felt safe and secure; he would protect them from their enemies and from disasters of various kinds. But when the Babylonians came to destroy the city and take the people away into exile, they wondered what had happened to God’s presence among his people.

The only conclusion they could draw was that God was no longer with them – that God had abandoned them to their fate – and that their sins had caused this terrible situation. For them to hear ‘The LORD your God is in your midst’ was very good news. God had forgiven their sins and was willing to start again with them. That is the joy we have. God has promised to be with us every part of our lives and will never abandon us.

Third, we rejoice because God rejoices over us. Zephaniah says: "He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you but will rejoice over you with singing."

What an amazing God we have! God is so excited about us that he sings a song of joy over us. Can you imagine God singing for joy over you?

Sometimes we may struggle with our own identity, or our worthiness, or how society may look at us. Yet God looks at us in all our brokenness and imperfections and breaks into song because of the renewed love he has for us and the restored relationship he has with us. All through his determination to have a relationship with us. That is something to never forget. God rejoices over us with singing.

Fourthly, we rejoice because God is bringing us to our eternal home: "At that time, I will gather you, at the time I will bring you home."

Remember what Dorothy said as she clicked her heels together three times in 'the wizard of Oz'. "There's no place like home". After you've been away on holidays, or spent the week on a camping trip, it's always good to be home. We live in a part of the world where we can have comfortable homes and enjoy the comforts of this life. Perhaps that is the reason people don't look forward to a home other than in this world. While everything is going well, one could easily have the illusion that complete happiness is possible in this world.

But then something happens to shatter that happiness, whether it's the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or the news of a terminal illness. Again, we are reminded we live in a world where there is suffering and pain, that life in this world is temporary. Our joy rests in the knowledge we were made for eternity. The kingdom of God is our real home, and on the day when it comes in all its fulness, that's when we'll find pure, complete joy forevermore.

Until then we experience what could be described as a 'now' and a 'not yet' joy as followers of Jesus. We have Joy *NOW*, knowing our sins are forgiven. We have joy *NOW*, knowing that God is present in every part of our lives. We have the joy *NOW*, knowing God loves us and finds joy in singing over us. But we are yet to have the complete, pure joy, with no hint of sorrow at all, which we will know one day. That's the future side of Advent; we look forward to the day when God's kingdom comes, and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. On that day, each of us will truly be home forever – home with God, and home with the millions of believers who have gone before us.

While we have cause for joy already in our lives, let us look forward to the day of our great homecoming, when we together with all God's people will know complete joy forever. And what a day of rejoicing that will be! Amen