

Judgement & Acceptance - Zephaniah 3¹⁴⁻²⁰, Luke 3⁷⁻¹⁸

Morning Communion, Advent 3, 16th December 2012

You miserable worms! Do you think that you can avoid God's judgement just by coming to church? Do you think you can earn a place in heaven just by attending services? Do you think it is that easy? No! What do you mean by just sitting there! Go and do something that really shows your heart is right, before God's punishment comes on you.

I thought you might appreciate a thoroughly biblical start to today's sermon. Thus John the Baptist's way of making you feel comfortable before he begins. 'Brood of vipers' in the old translations, pretty much equivalent to calling them children of the devil (which John also does in John 8⁴⁴). John may not have been a easy chap to have around.

The short book of the prophet Zephaniah announces God's approaching judgement on Jerusalem and Judah, and verses 1-13 of chapter 3, just before our reading, are about this judgement. As often happens with readings in church, we miss the judgement part, and have the comforting conclusion that promises restoration and forgiveness afterwards.

There are some similarities in this to the way we view Advent. The word means coming, and is the Latin translation of the Greek word *parousia*, presence, arrival or official visit. We think of it as looking forwards to Christ's comings, both his first coming at Christmas and his second coming at the end of time. But, as this reading in Luke shows, there is also an element of judgement associated with God's coming.

We are not very comfortable with judgement; but then I suppose no-one is. We talk of a God of love, of his unconditional acceptance of us, of the welcoming arms of the father for the prodigal son, of forgiveness freely available. Where does judgement fit it? Is it only for other people? In John's time, many Jews believed that only pagans could be judged, so John's message that they were all condemned would have been shocking. Hence the response, "What can we do?"

And then John's reply is remarkably low-key, and simple. He basically says, behave well. If you have more than you need (you can only wear one undergarment at a time), share it. If you are a soldier, do not intimidate people, do not steal. If you are a tax collector, be honest. What would it be today? Fairly similar, I expect. It is basically, behave decently, be generous, be caring, be good. For today's equivalent of tax collectors, the baddies, we might have corporate executives and bankers. The message is probably not be content with what you earn, but do what is right, and seek only a fair reward.

Is escaping judgement so easy? Just be a bit more considerate?

There is a tension here, between our understanding of God's free acceptance, his unconditional love, and yet his requirement that we are good. You could say that this is John the Baptist speaking, pre-Jesus, but Jesus himself talks in similar terms: he tells us to feeding the hungry, care for the sick visit the prisoners. Where is the grace in this? Are we accepted as we are, or do we have to change first?

It is not a new thought. Traditionally Christians have said that it is not our behaviour that determines whether or not we are saved, but our acceptance of God's grace. We are saved by grace. But then, that grace should change our behaviour, we should grow better as we grow more like Christ.

I have been reading Dave Tomlinson's book, *How to be a Bad Christian*. Dave came and talked here a month or so back, promoting the book. His premise is that many people are put off God by church. That all too often, Christians seem rigid, and judgemental, demanding certain sorts of behaviour and requiring belief in a mass of different things, much of which people find difficult and unhelpful. He maintains that people can, and do, discover God in everyday life, and that they come closer to him through doing acts of kindness and having moments of insight. God is not confined to churches, to Christianity, to those who have heard the message.

I am still not sure what I think of the book. There is a lot of good in there, and I would recommend that you read it. But I can see why it annoys some Christians, in that it has nowhere near a conventional view of how the Christian faith is presented. I am still working through how it applies.

I do think we know, at heart, that God is good, and that he requires us to be good. That is conscience, if you like. We believe that, innately, all people know when they are doing wrong, in general if not in every instance. That is a way God speaks in the world.

Dave Tomlinson points out that many people avoid church, and God, because they do not feel good enough. Many people do not need judging, and certainly not by us, because – though they may not admit it often – they feel they have failed and are inadequate.

The acts of kindness, goodness, right behaviour that are demanded by John the Baptist, and by Jesus, can be, I think, steps towards God. We have tended, in the church, to say that you only come to God by an act of faith, of assent to certain doctrines. And they are wonderful doctrines, of Jesus coming to earth to show us what the Father is really like, of giving us a route away from selfishness and sin into forgiveness and a full life. But we cannot just assent with our minds. That good evangelical word, repentance, means turning around, going in the other direction. We respond to God by deciding to go in his direction. People can do this not even realising it is God they are responding to, or knowing it is God but finding this unrelated to what they see in churches or Christianity. We would want to share with such people that it is God in Jesus that they are turning to. That there is strength and help available in Christ to help them continue on this path. That God does accept them, whatever they do, but strives to help them become better.

Today's collect is very apt on this:

O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare your way before you: grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight; for you are alive and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Let us welcome Jesus this Advent by daily seeking to do good, for God, and encouraging others in their efforts to do the same.

Jeremy Thake
St. John & St Stephen