

Comments on the Readings for Sunday - 13th December 2009

Third Sunday of Advent

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focus of the day: **BE JOYFUL & ACT FAIRLY!**

Bring up individual texts by left-clicking on the text links:
e.g. today's first reading
ZEPHANIAH 3 : 14 - 18
will open in a new window with text in the left column & our commentary scrolls down on the right.

Today's texts invite us to rejoice. This is the way to wait for the for the coming of God's reigning. But vigilance presupposes being attentive to, "the signs of the times."

The passage from Luke, speaks of the testimony of the one heralding God's reigning; John the Baptist. John's preaching had been impressive. The people ask him: "What shall we do?" The answer comes back directly, "Share what you have: your clothes; your food!"

the first reading: **ZEPHANIAH 3 : 14 - 18**

God's rule of the world in the face of cruel imperial powers and in light of extensive unfaithfulness in Judah, forms the backdrop for a late seventh century prophecy that re-images Jerusalem's future.

The passage uses the restoration of Jerusalem as an image of God's presence.

Zephaniah opens with a series of condemnations directed against the managers of Jerusalem and other nations. They are guilty of inequitous behaviour (Zp.1-3). The city of Jerusalem boasts of its self-sufficiency (Zp.2:15). But the city's proud managers don't recognise any outside agency. The city fails to attribute it's good life and security, to the power of God, in what God has created!

In place of a respectful attitude towards YHWH, a pragmatic ideology has taken as absolute any structure or mechanism that seems to work. To confront such attitudes, the prophet declares distress and doom as the inevitable outcome of such a self-sufficient ideology.

But starting in chapter 3, the prophet's tone changes (Zp.3:8ff). The holy One will mobilise and act decisively against the proud and mighty (Zp.3:9). The city will be liberated and its old failed managers will be replaced by, "a humble and lowly people", who seek, "refuge in the name of YHWH" and will, "do no wrong and tell no lies" (Zp.3:11-13).

A body of humble ones, who take steps to reform themselves morally and religiously, will be the agents of a renewed and secure Jerusalem after the terrible judgement "Day of YHWH".

A poem about the shape of the liberated city follows. The oppressors are defeated; alienation is ended; and YHWH's return is possible! The fundamental hope in the Hebrew tradition, is about a new covenant relationship with YHWH, in which all will know the Torah (or Law of Moses) and be forgiven! Now the prophet declares that the people of Jerusalem can sing and shout, because YHWH promises just such a relationship and all YHWH's

judgements against the failed city and its managers, have been set aside!

The prophet provides a vision for people, who presently live under oppression and poverty. The prophet's passionate conviction is that the world will surely become the world that YHWH intends. In other places in the scriptures, that hope is expressed as: natural enemies making peace; the lion and lamb lie down together (cf Is.11:6-9); and a new shepherd or ruler will, "do justice" (cf Ezk.34:11-16).

Hebrew hope and YHWH's promise, concern a transformed world. This hope & promise anticipates a sharp change of fortune: from fear to freedom; from defeat at the hands of an oppressor to repossession of one's own land and city! The prophet states that hope, in terms of a people who are no longer under YHWH's negative judgement which was characterised by the holy One's absence from the holy city. With this turn-around, Jerusalem has real reason to rejoice.

This change is cause for festivities in dance and song. Those who were oppressed and enslaved by debt, have their debt lifted from their backs. There is a general amnesty. Dreams of freedom will not be silenced by totalitarianism. Dreams of justice will indeed come to fruition -- in spite of unfair public institutions. The world is transformable. And it will be transformed! The claim is not a reasonable one. We will never be reasonably persuaded about such an astonishing claim. It can only be proclaimed -- it cannot be argued. And that is the stance of the prophet.

We, like the people of Jerusalem, have to first free our imagination, so that another way of thinking, seeing and knowing, can be practised in our world. In the restored city, YHWH's reigning displaces aggressive restlessness. People will be secure because there is no cause for anxious greediness. All will share and there will be enough for all. Such a hopeful vision is a deep threat to the way the present world is organised. The changes towards a new city and the new world that seems so threatening -- are in fact a movement towards a new world that liberates!!



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the response: PSALM = ISAIAH 12 : 2 - 6

The speaker celebrates a new, powerful orientation to life. The reason for celebrating is that there will be a new city, a new community and a new faithfulness. The holy God will not quit until such newness is

The speaker hints of newness and affirms trust in YHWH's salvation. The prophetic word is positive. There will be a new city, a new community and a new faithfulness! Verses 4-6 is a song of thanksgiving, joy and praise. It is YHWH's power-for-life which will be the gift to the city. This word of promise exposes the power for death of the present arrangements and the failure of the

brought about.
A glowing picture of the future serves to expose the present order's failure and delegitimizes its claims and dismisses its credibility!

present managers. Future promises serve to work against and subvert the present ordering; delegitimize its claims; and dismiss its credibility.

The speaker celebrates a new, powerful orientation to life. The reason for celebrating is that there will be newness. The holy God will not give up until that newness is brought about. A glowing picture of the future, serves to expose the present order's failure; to delegitimise its claims; and dismiss its credibility.



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the second reading: **PHILIPPIANS 4 : 4 - 7**

The reading focuses on the application of the hopefulness and joy the liturgy inspires. The sense of the nearness of God's presence shaped the faith and hope of the early Christian believers. Paul's reason for joy is based on his expectation of the final reigning of Jesus.

For the true disciple of Christ, rejoicing is an expression of selflessness. "Rejoicing in the Lord" (v.4) is an attitude derived from the holy One's nearness. Paul's words to the Philippians breathe a similar confidence to that expressed in Zephaniah. Because, "the Lord is near" this expectation has shaped the faith and hope of believers. The Philippian community lives on the verge of, or close to, something or someone, and the reverse is also true! This fact changes the nature of human experience and exchange.

Needs must be recognised and addressed to God in prayer (v.6). Christian prayer of petition should recognise that God incarnate in the community, is already hearing the prayer, when it is expressed aloud. Such petition should speak gratitude. Acknowledging prayer is answered doesn't fit with anxiety. In fact prayer is the way this anxiety is removed by handing it over to God. This peace comes from God incarnate. But its source transcends the life of individual Christians. It is an experience that goes beyond human understanding. The passage is permeated with the transforming hope that filled the early Christian community.

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the Gospel: **LUKE 3 : 10 - 18**

John the Baptist spoke of the need for a society to change. Great crowds came to the Baptist for baptism, to have their sins forgiven. John says to them, "Change society to make it clear you are

The crowds that John attracted by his preaching, were satisfied with mere ritual 'baptism'. John speaks about creating a society where people are equal. He asks them to change a system where some have a great deal and others have the cards stacked quite differently. The attitude of the wealthy - who have many shirts, houses, lands, cars and factories - must change. Luke uses the

converted!" Greek word, 'laos' (the people), to speak about those who heard John's message as a call for real change.

The crowd remained selfish and the Baptist called them "dangerous snakes"! Tax-men purchased the right to collect taxes and, in turn, they employed subordinates, to carry out their work. Abuses were common. Like the soldiers, they were hated and despised. John's advice to such classes of people is; "No stealing! Be simple, fair and just! No self-aggrandisement at another's expense" - that's "smoothing the way of the Lord!"

Later the tax collector, Zacchaeus, will volunteer such an attitude without having to be told (Lk.19:8). John's preaching emphasises that people are neither to depend on the rules of the Scribes, nor the moralising of the Pharisees! The Pharisees held certain jobs to be degrading. The Baptist up-grades all jobs, to the level of human responsibility. No one was to be, 'written off' as beyond changing their attitude!

When Jesus comes He will repeat in various ways, much of what John says. But Luke will clarify the distance between John and Jesus. According to Jeremiah, YHWH is the powerful One who redeems the people (Jr.50:34). Luke wants this message of John, about the, "more powerful One" to refer to Jesus. John the Baptist washes with water. The "more powerful One" washes with, "the holy Spirit and with fire"!

In the Book of Acts, Luke applies the words of the prophet Joel to the Pentecost event Joel's is an apocalyptic text that promises an out-pouring of, "the Spirit and fire" (Jl.3:1-5). Luke anticipates the more powerful practice of Jesus, as he describes the Baptist's practice.

The role of Jesus is already part of Christian history at the time Luke wrote. Pentecost, while not the end of that history, is the climax of the practice of, "the more powerful One," who exercises an accelerated outpouring of YHWH's power-for-life and newness. Instead of sending 'fire' to instantly demolish the opposition, Jesus will accomplish the sorting out of the people through, "giving the Spirit". Those who rely on meaningless rites will be put aside as worthless.

For Luke, Jesus is the Messiah. He is the Messiah of the holy God, who comes without impressive signs. What the Baptist speaks of as future, becomes a reality in Jesus' presence and later at Pentecost. John's social message was "good news" and his words were part of the pattern of the new age that was coming into being. Tax collectors and soldiers could be included in, "smoothing the Lord's path" without the 'crooked ways' of fussy Scribes or narrow-minded Pharisee moralists! This was revolutionary thinking. 'The crowd' heard bad news. 'The people' heard the Good News! The way a person heard the message of John - and changed - made the

difference! It will be the same when the "more powerful One" comes with the same message.



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