

Zephaniah 1:7-18

That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation

I have a friend whose great-great-grandfather was Rev. Dr Henry Harries, a Welsh Baptist minister of the hell and damnation kind. My friend has the manuscript of some of his sermons; which is rather splendid. Unfortunately, they are in Welsh and he cannot read them. I thought about my friend as I looked at our readings this Sunday

That day will be a day of wrath,

It is strong stuff. It is also *unfamiliar* stuff. In all my time here I have never heard Nicola tell us that the Harbour will turn to blood next Tuesday. Not once has Robert announced that death, riding a place horse, is shortly expected to charge through the breakfast buffet at the Marriott Royal.

We do not talk like this; but the bible does. That quotation, about the *day of wrath* comes from Zephaniah, but it was in our reading from I Thessalonians too,

Then sudden destruction will come upon them I Thess 5:3

It is what the biblical scholars call *apocalypse*, which means *uncovering*. It is supposed to *show* us something. The trouble is we are not sure what it is telling us. It might as well be in Welsh.

It is high time we thought about the day of wrath... *a day of trumpet blast and battle cry*. Now, the first thing to get straight is that kind of writing, all this *blood poured out like dust* has its roots in our history. That is not what we expect. Read passages like this and history is not what springs to mind. History is hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic leading to the rise of the National Socialists, all those essays you have to write about one thing leading to another, causes, consequences, and progress. Apocalypse feels like a different thing altogether, everything is out of proportion. It is as if you asked you aunt if she wanted tea, or coffee and she has set fire to your trousers. One thing does not seem to lead to another. Let me explain.

At Easter 1251 three men started to preach up a crusade. One of them was a runaway monk, called Jacob. He always had a letter in his hand and said the Blessed Virgin Mary had given it to him. She had reminded him that the news

of Christ's birth was given first to shepherds. So he summoned shepherds to his cause. He created an army of thousands. He said the sea was going to part so they could march to the Holy Land. Then it all began to go badly wrong. They marched to Amiens not Jerusalem, they started stealing food and then they took to killing the clergy. It was all very bizarre. And it begins to make a bit more sense when you know that in 1250, just a year before, the French King had been captured on crusade and was being held hostage. There was a crisis in France and this was the response to crisis. The story had its roots in history.

It is the same story when we turn to Zephaniah. Zephaniah is one of the 'minor prophets'. It is a bit harsh, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel are the Champions League of prophecy and there are twelve *minor* prophets and it is not a helpful label, they are not the same. Zephaniah begins his book

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah. I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the LORD

Zephaniah 1:1-2

What catches the ear and the eye is the drama: *I will utterly sweep away everything*. We are, though, supposed to notice what he says *first*. Zephaniah son of Cushi...son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah. That is history. Hezekiah was a king, so was Josiah. It is history that is red in tooth and claw. Josiah died in battle, on the plains of Megiddo. His life and his death were part of a titanic struggle in which the Babylonian Empire overwhelmed Judah. When Zephaniah prophesied about

a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements

that was not once-upon a time language, that was the way things were. It was history. Zephaniah is a way of making sense of destruction; of defeat and death.

the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there

We need to notice that scripture is not trying to tell 'It's OK, everything will be alright really'. In the row about *Thought for The Day*, in the last few weeks, Justin Webb suggested that the religious message is just

If everyone was nicer to everyone else, it would be fine

Zephaniah says he is wrong, so does Jeremiah, so does Amos. The message of the prophets is that death, and war, and catastrophe are terrible to behold. These are moments when the words fail us; you can only weep. There is no explanation to give, no message of reassurance. *Be silent* says Zephaniah. Nothing will save you, there is no sense to be made of this; there is nothing that will help you see.

I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind

We keep reading these passages of destruction and death as though they provide us with an account of what will happen; this surely is the way God will work it all out, make it better. That really is not what the prophets are saying. The emphasis falls on the fact that everything goes dark. It is impenetrable, mysterious. It is bewildering

a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness

Later, in different passages there can be words of reassurance, a new hope, but it is not a story in which one thing sensibly follows another. It is discontinuous. You shut one book. You pick up another. It is a new story.

It is, in fact, just the way we have to think about Jesus on the cross. Too often we suggest that he was dead and then he was alive again, as though it was a bit horrid and then he got better. We are supposed to hold two radically different ideas in our heads, see two pictures at once. He died, he is dead and he is risen. Death is real it still exists and there is something else.

This is one of those sermons where there ought to be ice creams and an intermission a chance to lie down and rub the temples. We are nearly there. The fundamental idea in all this is that we speak of things that are greater than we know. Put very simply, we are not in charge of this story. Zephaniah's shattering prophecy of darkness and destruction announces that we are caught up in something we do not control. We can make all sorts of statement about how we think it is going, we can assess and we can tidy it up and make it manageable, but at some point we have to let go.

To believe in God is to accept ultimately that there is a truth beyond our words, a reality that burns so bright it is blinding. We have got dangerously careless in the way we speak about our faith and it has happened because we do not take prophets like Zephaniah seriously. All the casual talk about a God

who speak to us, gives us a word, a God who *wants* this or that, a God we can meet; all of that fails utterly to convey what an encounter with the living God might be like. In scripture, you cannot meet God; the experience would consume you. There is no process we can work; no levers we can pull. We do not drive this business of belief. We are not the pivot on which everything turns.

You see, the story we tell is not about it being OK and making it a bit better. The story we tell is about death and the sheer horror that has been unleashed in Syria, or in senseless shootings in a church at Sutherland Springs. It is a story from which we need to be rescued and redeemed. It is not a story we tell as if we can make it add up; make sense. It is a story that has to include Christ going to the cross. In Rowan Williams words Jesus has to *leave himself, his nature, his calling his mission* and step into something else.

That is why Zephaniah is important. I would be a bit careful of saying that is what Zephaniah means, because Zephaniah is telling us not to jump to that sort of conclusion too quickly. This morning though it is a reminder that we are people who need to be redeemed and that the real story about us is told by Christ. Here we join in that story, we learn the story, become part of it, so that when we leave we might just possibly have a little less to say about ourselves and a little more to say about the Christ who comes to meet us here.