

## Joy to the world – Zephaniah 3:14-20

I did some field research for today's message, and I on Wednesday I visited Macquarie Centre – and the Christmas season was in full swing. Decorations everywhere. Carols playing over the PA system. There were appropriate season's greetings on windows and signs. And everyone was having a completely joyous time.

Everyone was smiling, humming along to the Christmas music, being patient, being generous, happily waving other people into available parking spaces, people being polite and gracious to checkout people and being careful not to bump their overloaded.

Except it wasn't really like that at all.

Because I found that people generally weren't smiling, unless they were being paid to smile, people had so much to do – after all there were only twenty-four shopping days left 'till Christmas! – people were pushing and shoving all over the place – I didn't actually see any cars touch each other in the car park, but it was pretty close a couple of times, and there were signs of impatience or just plain rudeness on display. In the aisles, though, shopping trolleys clashed with each other and with strollers, and with people's shins and ankles, children were shown huge amounts of toys and then told they had to wait until Santa came in a few weeks' time, children cried – understandably, I think – and some children even screamed.

It was anything but joyous. Despite the decorations, the music, the signs, the presence of Santa Clause and several helper elves and the prospect of presents in the not too distant future, it was anything but joyous.

But why wasn't it joyous?

Because we all want to be joyous, don't we? And not just us here, but all people, really? And especially at Christmas time. After all, that's why we go to the shops in such numbers in the first place, isn't it? Modern Australian society might not care much for Christianity, but it puts an awful lot of effort into Christmas. Because we want to make Christmas a joyous time. No sooner has the Melbourne Cup been run, Australia starts gearing up for the festive season.

We all want to make it a joyous time...

I checked the calendar: including today, there's still twenty shopping days until Christmas. Perhaps we should start panicking!

If we want to make it a joyous time, we'd better hurry.

Today is the second Sunday in Advent and advent is a time of waiting, a time of expectation, a time of looking forward to an arrival. At this time, Christians should be thinking about the arrival of three things – not three kings (they come later) - but three things: Firstly, the arrival of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem on that first Christmas. We probably do okay on remembering that – in fact, society probably does reasonably well on remembering the birth of Jesus. There may not be too much contemplation of who Jesus is and what he's done, but there are reminders – you don't have to go far to see nativity scenes.

And in all our major shopping centres, those temples of materialism, they play Christmas Carols that remind us of the birth of Jesus. For every Jingle Bells or White Christmas or Do they know it's Christmas, there seems to be a Silent Night, or a First Nowell or even an O Come All Ye Faithful.

And I take heart in that: there's some pretty meaningful lyrics sinking into people – perhaps subconsciously – even amidst the Christmas shopping frenzy.

One of my favourite memories of Woolworths St Ives (though I don't have many), was seeing a Jewish man perusing the Kosher meat cabinet, idly tapping his foot to a Neil Diamond Christmas Carol. Neil Diamond is, of course, also Jewish. And the Christmas Carol? O Come, o come, Emmanuel.

Of course, the second arrival that we should be thinking about is the return of Jesus – when, as we looked at last month, Jesus will return in glory and get rid of all that is wrong with the world.

And putting the world right, is, in a nutshell, the Christmas message. We can get distracted by the cute baby in the manger, the warm glow of lanterns in the stable, the humility of the shepherds, the grandeur of the wise men, the vision of the holy family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus, but the message of Christmas, when we get down to it, is God putting the world right. Peace on earth. Goodwill to all people. Joy to the world. God with us.

Jesus birth in Bethlehem is the first part of Jesus' story – a story in which he grew, and taught and healed, and cast out demons and performed great miracles, and would lead him to suffering and to death on the cross.

But Jesus' story didn't end there either, because he rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. And neither is Jesus' ascending into heaven the end of

the story, despite what some Christmas carols may lead us to believe (“Fit us to heaven to live with you there”). What we wait for is Christ’s return – not so much the ending of the story, as the completion of the story.

But the third arrival that we should be thinking about is the arrival of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and in our lives and in the life of our church. We should be thinking about how we are being transformed and what we are doing to further the kingdom of God. Whether it’s sharing our faith or supporting each other or praying or working in the world or whatever. God is in charge, and will bring about his kingdom – but we get to be part of it, and what we do, matters.

And if we look at these three arrivals – the nativity in Bethlehem, the return of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, they’re all good things. We shouldn’t be scared or wary of them - as we contemplate them we should be happy. We should feel blessed, in fact, we should be joyous.

Today’s reading from Zephaniah is a song of joy. “Sing, Daughter Zion;  
shout aloud, Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,”

There’s not much room for doubting what the tone is, is there? It’s definitely joyful.

Zephaniah is like Malachi one of the minor prophets, and he was prophesying at around the same time, but whereas Malachi’s prophecy from last week was one of warning, our reading from Zephaniah today is one of encouragement and one of hope. And one of joy.

There’s so much in there, Zephaniah talks about what God has done, what God is doing and what God will do, and the response that Zephaniah asks for isn’t for thank offerings and it isn’t even for humble gratitude, what he asks for ... is joy – joyous singing.

And not only that: Zephaniah tells us that God will be glad and that God will rejoice over his people with singing. We don’t hear much about God singing, do we? And yet, Zephaniah tells us that God will sing!

People sometimes talk about the kind and loving God of the New Testament and the harsh and vengeful God of the Old, but I think that idea isn’t borne out by what the scriptures tell us, and here, tucked away right near the end of the

Old Testament is this picture of God who is kind and loving and joyous – and who sings over his people.

Yes, there is some harsh treatment for those who are the enemies of the people of God – he has turned back your enemy in verse 15, he will be a warrior in verse 17 and he will ‘deal with’ oppressors in 19, but that is pretty soft, and the focus of Zephaniah’s song is on joy.

Not the fleeting joy of opening presents on Christmas morning, or of tucking in to a really nice Christmas dinner, or even the joy of friends and family briefly reunited. But lasting joy. The joy that we have in what God has done for us, and God’s joy over us.

Jesus said that “...there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

To be fair, much of the earlier part of the book of Zephaniah talks about coming judgement, the Day of the Lord that we heard from Malachi last week, judgement on Israel’s enemies, the wickedness of Jerusalem and the punishment of the other nations. So, on the surface, harsh and vengeful seems to fit the bill.

But dig a bit more deeply, and you get a different picture. It’s not God throwing down thunderbolts arbitrarily, it’s God fixing problems.

After all, who doesn’t want to see an end to apathy and complacency? By governments, organisations or individuals?

Who doesn’t want to see an end to people being led away from God?

Who doesn’t want to see an end to corruption?

Who doesn’t want to see an end to selfishness and self-interest that divides countries and communities and families?

Who doesn’t want to see an end abusing people and abusing world’s resources?

Who doesn’t want to see an end to murder, and theft and greed?

Who doesn’t want to see an end to suffering?

Who doesn’t want to see an end to oppression?

Because all those things are what God's judgement is addressing. And then we get to verse 13 of Chapter 3, when Zephaniah prophesies "the remnant of Israel, they shall do now wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid".

By verse 20, Zephaniah tells us "At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home.

I will give you honour and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes".

Now is the season of advent. When God did bring his people home – not by bringing them physically to him, but by sending his Son to his people. God sent his son to us, as a child born in a stable – a human being. A human being who would live and die and rise again and ascend to heaven. The God who was.

And we remember the arrival of the Holy Spirit within us. The Holy Spirit who gives us spiritual gifts: Love, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control and the most commonly forgotten one of all: Joy. The gifts which transform us now, so that we will grow in the love and knowledge and joy of God. The God who is.

And we remember the return of Christ. When Jesus will return in glory and God's plan for creation will be fulfilled: "He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away." (Rev 21:4) The God who is to come.

We know that the lead up to Christmas, as joyful as we try to make it, can be a hard time. People often lament the 'commercialisation of Christmas', and long for the 'spirit of Christmas' or the 'true meaning of Christmas'.

But I don't think the commercialisation of Christmas is the problem. I think the problem is people. The problem is us. In this time leading up to Christmas, we focus on trying to achieve perfection for Christmas. The perfect decorations, the perfect family gatherings, the perfect events, the perfect food, the perfect presents. And I suspect that these things never work out quite as perfectly as we planned. Remember Christmas 2020? That certainly didn't work out as planned.

In the remaining days leading up to Christmas, we need to remember, and to celebrate the season of Advent. Remember to celebrate the presence of God. The God who was, and is, and is to come.

But as we move through the season of Advent, we mustn't let Christmas distract us from God. And I don't say that in a mean way – we should be having parties and presents and gatherings and decorations: they are all good things, but they're not the main thing.

Whatever our plans are this Christmas, we need to remember the hope that Jesus brought to us and to all people that first Christmas, and we also need to remember the joy that God has in each one of us.

And let us all rejoice with God, as God sings over us.

Amen

**Song: How great thou art**

**Prayer for others**

**Offering and prayer**

**Hymn: O come, o come Emmanuel**

**Benediction and blessing**

As you go out into whatever the week has in store, know the joy of Christ in your heart and show the joy of Christ in your lives.

And go with the blessing of God almighty;  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.