

SERMON, 15 NOVEMBER 2020 – Zephaniah 1, 1 Thessalonians 5, Matt 25

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Old Testament lessons gives us an obscure prophet. The book of Zephaniah is short – so let 2020 not be the year of Covid, let it be the year when you sit and read the whole of Zephaniah. Zephaniah was a prophet round about 600 BC, a contemporary of Jeremiah. He is based in Jerusalem, and tells the people to turn back to God. He talks of destruction, punishment, plundering – “a full, a terrible end”.

Just the message we need in a pandemic. I do not believe in a God who sends a pandemic, a plague on his people – I believe the New Testament gives us a different view of God, gives us a God who loves his people. I do believe that our world is sinful, our world is not what God would want, and the dis-ease of this creation, the sin of humanity, the way we use and treat this world. leads to viruses, leads to suffering and death. I do believe that if humanity listened to God, if humanity spent time in prayer and worship, if humanity followed his commands about justice, fairness, and all the other good things – then we would not be in such a mess. I read the statistics about the number of people with disabilities who have died because of Covid, a death rate increased because people with disabilities are not thought to have much value in our country, and I want a different way of valuing human beings. I read the statistics about the number of people from the BAME communities who have died because of Covid, a death rate increased because people who do not have white skin are not thought to have as much value in our country, and I want a different way of valuing human beings.

But I struggle as well. Part of me wants to preach a belter of a sermon about how evil it is that we are not allowed to meet in our churches. I want to shout at this government that worship is not simply a leisure activity that can be stopped at will. Obviously if we were a leisure activity that earned money, we would be allowed to continue. I am angry that garden centres are open – the mental health value of them acknowledged. I want people to worship, to pray, to gather – there are mental health values, but more than that. We are supposed to be country that values religion, indeed we are still the Church of England by Law Established – yet the Prime Minister announces to the press that churches and places of worship will be closed. He tells the press before he tells the Archbishops. It really is staggering – I feel we are being treated with contempt. And there is almost total silence from everyone - Her Majesty is Defender of the Faith, head of the Church of England. If she has had a quiet word, no one is listening. We have bishops in the House of Lords – they seem to have said very little, and no one seems to be listening. I’ve been reading for a course on the

Reformation – and the world then seems a million miles away from the world today. In those days, bishops, clergy, people went to the stake for what they believed – these days we take to twitter!

So, do I still want to preach a belter of a sermon – or is it safer to stick to twitter to complain?

Then I get a tweet from the University Hospitals of Derby and Burton:  
“It is with deep sadness we announce that UHDB has lost a dedicated and committed colleague this week to Covid-19. Dr Krishnan Subramanian, a consultant anaesthetist at Royal Derby Hospital, sadly passed away yesterday.”

No, I will not complain that our churches are shut. If we have to worship in different ways in order to protect our communities and our health service, then worship in different ways is what we will do. We hold Dr Krishnan, his family, friends and colleagues in our love and prayers – and commit them to God’s love and God’s care.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians about times and seasons. The thing about times and seasons is that they come round every year, and we know what to do. Not this year. I’ve just written my Vicar’s letter for the two magazines – and it was difficult. How do I write about Christmas when I have no idea how we will be able to celebrate Christmas, how we will be able to worship at Christmas, whether we will be able to meet together, to do all the things we normally do?

How do we make our churches beacons of light, if we can only welcome a few people in? If carols and broom handle nativity figures and anthems and organs and candles and flowers, if most (perhaps even all) of them are taken away – what do we do? How are we positive and excited if we are negative and frightened. Answers on a postcard please!

Well, I can still remember holding each of my children shortly after birth – and the emotion of love that surrounded me. If this Christmas, all I can do is meditate on the birth of Christ – that really is all I need.

So, if I believe the message of Christmas, the birth of the Saviour, God incarnate, light shining in darkness – what do I do?

The Gospel is clear – don’t just bury it. Take the treasure we have been given, and do something with it. Doing nothing is not an option. Tempting though it may be to go into hibernation until the summer, I am not a tortoise, nor are our churches. I’m not sure what we do – but God knows. God will guide, God will

give us the resources we need. The Psalmist, as psalmists usually do, has got it right: read Psalm 90:

- <sup>1</sup> Lord, you have been our dwelling-place  
in all generations.
- <sup>2</sup> Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
- <sup>3</sup> You turn us back to dust,  
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'
- <sup>4</sup> For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.
- <sup>5</sup> You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
- <sup>6</sup> in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.
- <sup>7</sup> For we are consumed by your anger;  
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
- <sup>8</sup> you have set our iniquities before you,
- <sup>9</sup> For all our days pass away under your wrath;  
our years come to an end like a sigh.
- <sup>10</sup> The days of our life are seventy years,  
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;  
even then their span is only toil and trouble;  
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
- <sup>11</sup> Who considers the power of your anger?  
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due to you.
- <sup>12</sup> So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a wise heart.

It's interesting that when the Lectionary was put together, they decided to end this psalm at verse 12. I suspect verses 15-17 also have something to say to us (however difficult it may be to say "Amen" at the end)

- Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
and for as many years as we have seen evil.
- <sup>16</sup> Let your work be manifest to your servants,  
and your glorious power to their children.
  - <sup>17</sup> Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us,  
and prosper for us the work of our hands—  
O prosper the work of our hands!