

# *a coming apocalypse*

a sermon preached on the  
*third sunday of advent*

16 December 2018

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Song of Isaiah; Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 7-18

The Song of Isaiah—which we heard this morning in the place of the Psalm—was written in the late seventh century BCE, some one hundred years before the fall of Jerusalem. It betrays a particular Jewish confidence in Israel's place as the chosen people of God for whom God will always be provident. It claims: 'Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.' No need to worry, no need to act for ourselves, God is my fixer at my right hand.

A scant eight decades later Zephaniah has a different view of the world. He predicts the fall of Jerusalem that was to come at the hands of the Babylonian invaders. In the first chapter Zephaniah prophesies a coming apocalypse saying:

'At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, "the Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm". Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.'

By the time we get to the final chapter, Zephaniah has calmed down and decided that despite the wrath to come there will be a glorious restoration of the fortunes of Jerusalem at the hands of a benevolent God, as indeed there eventually was, albeit at the human hands of King Cyrus of Persia.

Following their release from Babylon, Israel's self-serving conclusion was that in their exile in Babylon they had repented their setting aside of God, endured the ignominy of foreign domination for a season and so the Temple could be rebuilt and normal life restored. All was at last well again and, as Zephaniah says, 'The Lord, their God, is in their midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.'

An apocalypse is narrowly averted by the timely intervention of God and Israel's rightful place is resumed. That is, until the Romans arrived, domesticating the Herod family into a compliant puppet kingdom and watching on as the Temple factions played politics with the Torah, corrupting themselves and a people who had an unrealistic vision of their place in the cosmos.

But that complacency was only to last until John called out the lack of integrity of those in power—the Pharisees and the other Temple factions, their use of the Temple and the word of God for their own purposes.

John also lambasts the people—comfortable Israel—for failing to do anything about it. He insults the crowd saying: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' And then calls on them to bear fruits worthy of repentance. To act for themselves and each other in a way that would make them worthy of God's love.

The Temple was ultimately destroyed for a second time, by the Romans, the Temple cult with it and Judaism are dispersed into the smaller, less politically powerful synagogues. An apocalypse is perhaps not quite averted but the people of Israel live on, less powerful but not destroyed.

The new Christian movement survives by staying below the radar, awaiting a different kind of apocalypse, the final day of judgement. In an echo of the prophets, Paul writes to the Philippians 'Do

not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.’

My reading of Isaiah, Zephaniah and Paul is of an other-worldly abandonment of the responsibility of human agency, a handing over to God all of all their problems, failing to act responsibly, to bear fruits worthy of repentance.

A little less than two thousand years later, in about the 1970s, scientists begin warning of yet another apocalypse, global warming as they called it then, climate change now, somewhat euphemistically. As we meet here today, a conference of politicians, government officials and scientists are meeting in Katowice in Poland, for the twenty fourth UN climate conference, trying to put together a global agreement that finally delivers the action needed to respond to the cataclysm that faces the entire globe.

So far nothing has worked. In last week’s *Guardian Weekly*, the facts are set out starkly: world population growth is likely to reach 15 billion before it peaks while the impact of global warming causes massive reduction of food-producing land. We see this in the droughts in Kenya, Somaliland and now Queensland and NSW. It is predicted that there will be 140 million climate refugees by 2050: 140million, in just 32 years’ time. One sixth of the all species, plant and animal, are expected to become extinct.

Yet, in Katowice, in a breathtaking perversity, the US is hosting a pro-coal forum designed, according to the *Guardian*, to ‘showcase ways to use fossil fuels as cleanly and efficiently as possible, as well as the use of emission-free nuclear energy’. Only one other country is participating in that forum: Australia. We are being represented by our Environment ambassador!

The gross dereliction of responsibility of world governments, led by Trump with Australia not far behind, puts our future at grave risk. The Queensland government continues to clear land, causing erosion, loss of topsoil and water and harming the Great Barrier Reef, the Federal Government fails to enact anything like emissions control or support for renewable power generation, and in this past week has announced a taxpayer-funded scheme to support expansion of coal fired electricity generation.

Even the leader of the opposition quibbles over whether he would allow the construction of another coal mine—Adani—in the event of his election as Prime Minister next year, which seems on the cards. So it is no surprise that Australia comes in fifty-seventh out of sixty in the Climate Performance Index. The call in Isaiah to trust and to not be afraid does not seem to cut it.

Clearly, the time of complacency is over. But in the face of impossible odds that confront us with climate change, where the scale and complexity of the problem is so vast, the easiest response is avoidance, to say I cannot do anything that makes a difference, my voice is too small, I am too weak.

Understandable perhaps, but in this environment of political and moral poverty, together, as a community we can, we must, do something.

There are two opportunities. The first is, of course, to initiate action that leads to change of the behaviours that cause environmental damage. But perhaps, for the church, there is something else to do, and that is to recreate the community that is required to bring these changes about. Because it is failure to act as community which is at the heart of the problem. It is through acting individually as if no one else matters, that this climate crisis is upon us.

This is where the church can, if it chooses, make a real difference. It could do something that it has not done for some years—to stand up on principle and show community and moral leadership. We have an opportunity to demonstrate the power and the value of a people that live not for themselves, but for each other.

A community that provides the moral leadership that is missing from governments and other national institutions. A community that will not allow vested interests to use political and economic power to compromise the principles in which the community believes. To lead by example, to act because without action the words are meaningless.

When I say the church can act in leadership and our principle, I don’t mean some headquarters unit in the Anglican Centre or by pronouncements in news releases or from pulpits, and it certainly isn’t by the bishops on past experience, but us. It is us who have to lead by voice and action.

None of us can continue to hold our personal comfort as something apart from the global crisis that confronts us. We can no longer continue to act as individuals, no longer fool ourselves that

whatever we do personally makes no difference in the rest of the world. We have to surrender our individual convenience for the sake of community and we have to do this on a global scale.

It will demand sacrifice. We have to abandon our assumption of entitlement and look to our responsibility, to how we can one by one but in community, make a difference. Only then perhaps we can trust and not be afraid.

References:

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