

from darkness to day
a sermon preached on the
twenty-fourth sunday after pentecost
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at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Zephaniah 1: 7, 12-18; Psalm 90: 1-8, 12; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11; Matthew 25: 14-30.

A great biblical writer once said about the book of Zephaniah that it is the hottest book in the Old Testament. It may be a surprise to us that comment has been applied to the small and obscure book of Zephaniah—but there are good grounds for such an assessment. Not only did Zephaniah not hold anything back in his denunciation of the sinful city but also the language he used to describe the approaching day of the Lord was unparalleled in its fierceness: ‘That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of clouds and thick darkness.’ Little wonder perhaps that language of such vivid quality came to be taken over in mediaeval times to portray the Last Judgment itself and as such was incorporated into the Latin Mass for the dead as the *Dies Irae*. A popular version owing something to the tradition of the Negro spiritual is still in use:

O sinner man, where will you run to
All on that Day?

Uncomfortable as some of the language may be to modern ears, judgment is an undeniable theme throughout the Bible, not least in the New Testament, as today’s readings testify. But surely the theme of judgment is something of an embarrassment in contemporary times? Postmodern humanity is not going to be frightened into faith or morality by the spectre of the last judgment. He or she is more likely to share the contentedness of the prophet’s fellow citizens who were enjoying a life of ease and religious indifference. ‘The Lord will do nothing good or bad’ 1.12.

Nevertheless, judgment came. It was inherent in the very processes of history and could not be averted. A politician was once asked by a young reporter about the factors that make government difficult. His response was ‘Events dear boy, events’. This response is an acknowledgement of the train of instability which runs through public life. A contemporary list of areas to watch might include: institutional shakiness, electoral indifference, media domination, social alienation, resurgent disease, educational frustration, uncontained crime. Such a catalogue is easily compiled but no list of clear and present danger can include the unexpected. ‘When they shall say peace and safety, then sudden calamity shall come upon them...and they shall not escape’ [1 Thess. 5.3]. Every day is potentially Judgment Day.

While it may seem to some observers of modern society that our problems are such that we will be buried under the collapsing weight of our own civilisation, yet for the most part, it seems that we dwell comfortably on our laurels—as Zephaniah would have put it, lethargic like wine that has sat too long upon its dregs.

Sloth is one of the deadly sins not merely for the laziness aspect of it, but because it betrays a reluctance to engage with the terms of life and it spurns the grace inherent in life itself. It is a vote of no confidence in God. This was the condition of servant number three in the parable we heard in today’s gospel reading, who having received a talent from his master hid it in the ground, thereby frustrating all his master’s expectations. When declaration day came the master blamed the servant for deliberate sloth. The servant had brought trouble on himself as the result of a serious miscalculation.

Both the servant in the parable and the citizens Jerusalem in Zephaniah's time found themselves in trouble from the same cause, namely, a miscalculation as to the character and purposes of God. In case of the servant, he had the notion of God as 'a hard man', rigorous in his dealings and lacking anything resembling grace. This was a distorted view of God; even within the terms of the parable, God is shown by the joyful generosity with which the master greeted the spirited efforts of his other two servants.

Equally, in the case of Zephaniah's complacent citizens, it was a distorted view of God, which led to their disastrous lethargy. They had written God out of their calculations on the basis that he was a non-factor in the world of everyday affairs. 'The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad' 1.12. Clearly hardness and softness are equally inappropriate ways of characterising God. A mistaken reading of the spiritual dynamics left all these parties in shadow lands of their own making.

Hence the central importance of being rightly related to God. This is the theme of the reading we heard from the first letter to the Thessalonians. The Day of Judgment is the initial topic of concern to Paul's correspondents but drawing them away from their preoccupation with times and seasons, he points them to the importance of a right relationship to God. His message is: know your Christianity and the matter of Judgment will look after itself. What is required is a transformed relationship and this is what Christianity aspires to provide.

The attraction of Jesus even after 2000 years is in his power to change people. The power of Jesus to transform is seen nowhere more clearly than in the cross. 'He died for us', is put forward as a basic gospel statement. This bold declaration speaks of a sacrifice made, a price paid, a counter weight offered which in the mystery of God's largesse is credited to our human account. The crucial point is that it was done for us; its meaning is a sign of God's kindness to the undeserving. It is unambiguous and persuades us to drop all negativity and hostility and to be reconciled with God. On the basis of this new relationship the whole tenor of our life shifts from darkness to day, from griminess to gratitude.

And what of judgment? It seems that the negativity of Judgment has been swallowed up in the positive life of Christ.