

Sometimes we avoid the biblical prophets because all we hear is their piercing warnings. Yet if we take the time to meet them in their historical context, the prophets bring us back to divine messages we desperately need today. They said, because God is on a mission to restore the fallen world, this next major divine intervention will be paired with a focus also on establishing a new world order, even as the old is falling away.

The prophet Zephaniah (630-610 BC) provided a few paragraphs against Judah and the nations that surrounded it, couching the imminent intervention of God in the increasingly common term, “The Day of the Lord.” In this final chapter, Zephaniah turned his attention toward restoration and renewal, pointing to a future when the fortunes of God’s people would be made full once again. His words are the basis for all Advent celebrations: in a darkened world where the ways of God are no longer known, God will rescue the covenant community, restore their joys, and provide a light of grace that shines through them, calling the nations to join them.

The true light, of course, would be Jesus, even though Zephaniah could not have understood at the time exactly how the divine message through him would be fulfilled. We, on the third Sunday of Advent, know exactly what God had in mind and now wait in expectation for Jesus’ return to fully and perfectly realise the grandeur of the kingdom.

One of the great words of Advent is joy. Its why we light the pink Advent candle representative of joy. It is a constant theme of the prophets when characterising the redeemed community that emerges from exile and awaits God’s next and greatest act. It is the heartbeat of Elizabeth and Zachariah as they hear that their cursed infertility is giving way to the medical impossibility of God’s special pregnancy. It is the lyric of Mary’s song as she feels the miracle of God’s love growing inside her. Joy is the primary category in the index of the hymns of the church.

Joy is also a slippery eel, often squeezing past our best laid religious trappings and devotional weapons. In the East, the story is told of an extremely wealthy king who ruled a vast domain from magnificent palaces. He had the respect of his citizens and peace within his borders. Yet for some perplexing reason he was very unhappy. The king’s doctors could find no medical problem. Neither could psychiatrists figure it out. One old wise man finally provided this advice: “There is but a single cure for the king. Your majesty must sleep for one night wearing the shirt of a truly happy man.” Strange advice, to be sure! But the desperate king needed only a hint of finding release from his malady to command that the search begin. So his messengers scoured the land, looking for one truly happy person. Tragically, they couldn’t find even one happy person! Everyone had experienced days of sorrow and times of mourning. Many might laugh for a moment but sooner or later each person would settle back to reflect on the pain in his or her life. Almost beyond hope, the messengers suddenly happened upon a beggar next to the road leading back to the palace. He wore a smile. He giggled uncontrollably. He laughed at life as it surrounded him. Here was a truly happy man! “Give us your shirt,” the messengers demanded. “The king has need of it!” But the fellow only doubled over with spasms of hilarity. “I’m sorry!” he gasped, between fits of laughter. “I have no shirt!”

Tantalising, isn’t it? To see joy and not to own it? To hear laughter and yet to find your own throat stopped with pain and silence? To have a cure within hand’s reach and still missing the opportunity to close the deal? But that’s where Advent joy is such a great message of the “good news” of the church, especially in the darkness of sin’s night and the terrible things that we hear in the news. For St Paul, it is the essential word to speak and to live, so much so that he has to repeat himself about it. The English language has a number of similar words that relate to good feelings inside. Pleasure, for instance, reflects our delighted response to sensations that stimulate us. Happiness surrounds us because of certain happenings in our lives. And then there’s joy.

In a sense, pleasure is an “it” word; it mostly has to do with things that touch our senses. And happiness is a “me” word; its primary focus is my response to events that come and go in my life. But joy is really a “we” word; it usually reflects what happens between persons, between me and you, between me and God. Joy, as St Paul notes in his letter to the Philippians, starts in the heart. It’s a relational word. Rejoice in the Lord.

Robert Rainy, one-time head of New College in Edinburgh, Scotland, who came to Melbourne later in life and in fact died here used to say “joy is the flag which is flown from the castle of the heart when the king is in residence there!”

If joy starts in the heart, it is refined in the mind. It is more than an emotion that comes and goes. It is deeper than a reflexive response that needs the right kind of stimulation. It is an act of the will. “I will say it again: rejoice!” commands St Paul in his letter to the Philippian Christians. Joy grows from heartfelt relationships. But it is also a choice of the mind, as John makes clear when he applies this treatment to those who come to him looking for a way beyond the humdrum of their lives. Joy must be chosen as a part of sealing the deal, and joy comes when we direct our attention to serving others.

John seems to have had all the charisma of a pit bull or a nightclub bouncer. He looked strange. He had no time for conversational pleasantries. He didn’t use Dale Carnegie’s techniques to “win friends and influence people.” The only word was slicingly divisive; the only message a stab through the heart. “You brood of vipers!” he harangued his fans and paparazzi, yelling at them that neither bloodlines nor cultural heritage nor religious piety gave them a leg up in life. But for John, the bad news is good news, and the good news only sneaks in on the shoulders of the bad. As another John (“of the cross”) would later remind us, it is only when we pass through the “dark night of the soul” that we are finally ready for dawn, aching for its energies to transform the world in which we have wallowed too long.

John was a larger-than-life figure in himself and his public interactions, yet he was surprisingly self-effacing. While the crowds flocked to hear him preach, mesmerised by his one-note song played with sirenic intrigue, his finger kept pointing in another direction. “I’m not the one!” he cried. “Look to him who follows me!” he shouted. Of course, what John expected from his cousin was an even larger troll to rain more tar and feathers on polite society. “I baptised you with water,” John warned, “but he will consume you with fire!”

John was the last of the Old Testament prophets, a transitional figure like Samuel of old, standing between the judges and the kings. John realised that tectonic plates were colliding, the old order was passing more quickly than a Bob Dylan song, and few would enter the New Age of Messiah unless they passed first through the fires of judgment.

John was the doomsday prophet par excellence. He had decoded the secrets of the Old Testament and realised he was standing on the brink of the New. What would happen next, he was not entirely certain, but whatever it was, people should not presume to drift blithely from one into the other. When God slams into our world to deal with our stuff, no one can expect him to play nice.

On this third Sunday of Advent, it is not Santa Claus we are looking for, and John knew it. Jesus once slipped into our world by the backdoor. It won’t happen the same way next time. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton