

This has to have been one of the most thoroughly depressing weeks we've had for a very long time. Our domestic politics have descended into farce. Our elected representatives are behaving like a peculiarly unpleasant bunch of ten-year-olds. A gunman has shot up a Christmas market. Our international status and credibility are collapsing. The meeting that might just encourage more responsible behaviour towards our environment is deadlocked (or at least, it was when I wrote this, and if it has now sorted something out the results are unlikely to be taken seriously by the people who could do most to make a difference). The murder rate in London is higher than it has been for years, and it's mostly young men who are being killed. Our streets are grubby. I've still got a batch of presents to buy, wrap up and post. Our local post office has closed, and as a result the pillar box at the end of my road is stuffed so full that I can't get my cards into it. Sainsbury's no longer stocks Bath Olivers or that wonderful white cleaning sponge thing. And....and.....and.....

And then I looked at this morning's readings. 'Sing aloud!' says Zephaniah to the Israelites. 'Rejoice! Exult!' 'Rejoice!' says St Paul to the little Christian community in Philippi. 'Rejoice! Do not worry!' I doubt whether most of you, asked for your mental picture of St Paul, would describe someone bursting with joy and insouciance. How on earth can we rejoice and exult and sing in the middle of the general awful state of things? John's opening words in the Gospel seem more appropriate. I can think of several groups of people for whom 'You brood of vipers' would be an entirely justifiable greeting.

I am, of course, making the mistake of taking all of this at face value. We don't know much about Zephaniah, other than that he lived in Judah in the seventh century BC, in the reign of King Josiah. It was an exceptionally troubled time. There was unrest, turmoil and repeated invasions. Zephaniah had a vision of what he called the 'Day of the Lord' – a day of total, devastating, universal divine judgement. There would be fire, pestilence, drought, war and death. Cities would be ruined, farms abandoned, prosperous towns would become the haunt of wild animals. When St Jerome translated the Bible into Latin this day, the day of the Lord's anger, became 'dies irae, dies illa', and those words, via a thirteenth-century Franciscan hymn, have become part of the tremendous music of the Requiem mass, with composer after composer trying to convey sheer terror.

Zephaniah knew exactly what had caused this judgement. Religion had become meaningless. Government had failed, religious and political leaders were corrupt or useless. Apathy and indifference prevailed, people thought they were powerless and had given up doing anything to challenge abuses or stand up for their beliefs. Nobody cared about how society worked any more. For something written 2,700 years ago, this has a remarkably contemporary ring to it. You would think Zephaniah had been reading the newspapers.

But that was only the first part of Zephaniah's message. He could also see a gleam of hope. The Day of the Lord will destroy the corrupt, the proud, the profane, the dictators and the profiteers. The people who will survive are the people who, as he says in the verses immediately before today's reading, are humble and lowly, who do no wrong and utter no lies, who seek refuge in the name of the Lord. Despite the terror and despair, no-one shall make them afraid. These people are Elijah's 'remnant', the people who are faithful whatever happens. They will survive the 'refiner's fire' (last week's reading) and emerge purified. They may look like a bunch of faltering outcasts, but they will be the ones to rejoice in the end.

These people's descendants are the ones that John the Baptist is talking to. Now they are under Roman rule, they have been violently and brutally repressed during the Maccabean revolt which is still within living memory, and their religious leaders are Roman sycophants. John's vision is as apocalyptic as Zephaniah's. The coming one will be a powerful conqueror, using his winnowing fork to clear the threshing floor and throw the rubbish into an unquenchable fire. The symbolism would not have been lost on his audience. His prescription for survival is also much the same as Zephaniah's. People are to act fairly, to share what they have, to be honest, and not to take advantage of any position or authority they hold. He doesn't preach violence or resistance, but calls for repentance and right living. He even advocates a proper respect for the hated Roman government, by paying the correct taxes.

Maybe in this light we can look at the affairs of the world and of this country rather differently. Maybe we can pay real attention to developing more sympathetic, compassionate, generous behaviour in our own lives. Maybe we can share what we have more willingly with those who have much less, even if we cannot resist sharing our opinions about the state of the nation at the same time. Maybe we can find ways to stand up for truth and justice when it is manifestly lacking. Maybe, in these last few days before Christmas and perhaps even afterwards, we can take St Paul's words truly to heart:

'The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

May the peace of God be in all our hearts this Christmas.