

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 12th December 2021
Advent 3 YrC

What should I do?

When I was at college we had a student fire officer who was a retired army Major. Like all good military types he was a stickler for detail. On taking up his responsibilities he realised there hadn't been a fire drill for a very long time. So, our new fire officer set to preparing for a fire drill. We wouldn't know when it would take place. We just knew there would be one. He selected fire wardens for each floor in the college, designated fire meeting points, rehearsed the fire wardens so they knew what to do and the day was 'secretly' set.

The day arrived. The alarm was activated. The wardens swung into action. The end result was pretty poor. We ambled down the stairs and through the corridors, gathering at the meeting point, some with their coffee in hand. What I most remember is the retired Major running around, shouting and being completely exasperated at our inability to exit the building in a way he felt appropriate for the occasion.

As we all stood there in the college car park the fire officer barked at us for being so hopeless and that at the next practice he expected a much better response. At the mention of another practice we audibly groaned. He stopped, looked at us and said, "You must remember the seven magic 'Ps' – Prior Practice and Preparation Prevent a Pretty Poor Performance!

Being prepared should I guess be a Christian watchword. The words of the prophet Zephaniah call the people of God to celebrate as the Lord brings freedom and release to the people of Israel. To put this into context Zephaniah has spent the previous chapters berating the poor state of temple worship. In his criticism he speaks forthrightly about divine judgement. The shocking words of chapter 1 prepare the people for a need for change that will usher in renewal with the joyful transformation and salvation proclaimed in the reading we had today. Thought to be written around 630 BCE, just before the religious reforms of King Josiah and the renewal of temple worship, Zephaniah is calling

the people, mired in the impurity of worship of the time, to prepare for the actions of God that will eventually bring renewal and salvation to Israel.

In the passage from Philippians, Paul calls the faithful to rejoice and witness to their belief in the relative nearness of Christ's coming. Being prepared by living the life of faith will itself be a witness to the place of the risen Christ, who promised he would come again, in our hearts and lives.

It was the lack of this preparedness that John berated in his preaching. He was telling the people of Israel to be ready for the Messiah, the Lamb of God who was coming into the world. Like Zephaniah, John berated the people and the Temple authorities for their poor adherence to the words of the prophets and the promise God laid out in the scriptures and the history of Israel. Harsh words came from his lips as the people gathered to hear his words. Calling the people to repentance, John places before the people a challenge – don't rely on past generations, renew your personal relationship with God now. John is then challenged by his audience: "What shall we do?"

John's answer is seemingly simple – give away your excess, don't take more than you need, act justly. A simple lifestyle suggestion calling for an end to extortion and injustice, witnessing to the believer's renewed relationship with God.

As we approach the festive season characterised by excess and abundance John's words are a challenge. The response he calls for, that is proclaimed by Zephaniah and encouraged by Paul is witness. Witness to our own preparations for the way of the Lord. Our example to the world of charity and restraint not only witness to the love of God in our own lives but to our preparedness to receive Jesus when he comes in glory. This is no idle wish. It is a truth by which the prophets of both old and new traditions call all the faithful to live. Our God centred lives are prepared for that coming and fulfilment of God's promise. As we cease to live with excess – too many clothes, too much food, more money than we need – as we turn to care for our neighbours – calling for justice, for peace, for love – we stand witness to that promise made in Jesus Christ. We are prepared to receive the Christ – he whom we will witness to in our celebrations of his birth.

If we want to begin somewhere, when better than now? To look to God, born of Mary, incarnated as Jesus the Christ child, as the centre and purpose of our being. A being renewed in the power of the Holy Spirit and witnessed to by evocation of justice, care, restraint and charity.

What shall we do? Cried the people of Jerusalem. Serve the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself replies Jesus.

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