

## A homily for the Second Sunday before Advent

*Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18*

*1 Thessalonians 5.1-11*

*Matthew 25.14-30*

Sometimes it doesn't matter how hard we try to make sense of our world, ourselves and God, these things remain as disorientating and sometimes destabilising mysteries. We can look to Scripture to help settle our questions and our doubts, but sometimes Scripture seems to move in a contrary direction. Instead of neat words of comfort or stories of balm, its words explode right in front of us, subverting our expectations and unsettling our imaginations.

Our readings today play with the themes of suffering and wrath, themes that feel dangerously close for us in a world of pandemic, plague and political instability. Our first reading from the prophet Zephaniah takes what was for many a reason for hope – the coming of the Lord – and turns it completely on its head. For a people given over to injustice and frivolity this coming will no longer be one of joy, but rather of fearful judgement, 'a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.'

Paul in our second reading starts in a similarly traumatic vein, with the coming of Jesus likened to the start of labour for a pregnant woman. But immediately we realise this is a far more hopeful image as labour pains give way to the joys of childbirth and physical trauma enables newness to come forth.

Even our parable mixes trust and terror, and dishonesty and investment. Here the master castigates his slave as 'lazy' and 'worthless', even as the slave knows his master only too well, 'a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter.' Where is God in all of this? Is God really only to be found in such displays of wrath and retribution or in caricatures of mastery and arbitrary power?

At this moment in our history it might be too easy to speak of God's wrath, of anger and retribution for a world gone wrong. I heard someone the other day speak about the pandemic as God's way of correcting the abuses of human activity in our world, our destruction of habitats and cultures, our over-use of the world's resources. But the problem here is that God's 'wrath' always seems to target the most vulnerable of us. It seems to be the elderly and the unwell, those who are caught in poverty, those without recourse to medical supplies and services, that are the most at risk from this supposed divine retribution. It might be right to say that God is angry with the injustices and imbalances of our world, but surely it's wrong to speak of him visiting his wrath upon those who find themselves most vulnerable and at risk?

Recently I have been considering some theologians and saints who might be helpful as we try to get a handle on our situation, as we try to discern little flickers of candlelight in the darkness. A number of weeks ago we heard from the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich, who wrote so powerfully about anxiety and how Christian faith calls for both a 'shaking of the foundations,' and a new 'courage to be.' But for a few moments this morning, I'd like us to consider Julian of Norwich, a much beloved fourteenth century mystic and theologian. We probably know her mostly for her two beautiful theological refrains, the first that in all things 'love is God's meaning,' and the second, 'that all shall be well, and that all manner of things shall be well.'

But if we were to view Julian as a figure of religious calm removed from the chaos of her world, then we would be dead wrong. Indeed, the hope-filled nature of her writings become 'all the more remarkable in terms of its reflection of an all-loving, all-forgiving God when considered against the dramatic backdrop of late fourteenth century religion, politics and conflict.' (Ramirez, p. 23). Julian lived through the aftermath of one of the most awful moments of human history, the Black Death. The effects on the population of England was utterly devastating, with many areas unable to fully recover from the plague for many centuries. In Norwich alone it is estimated that 7,000 of its 12,000 inhabitants died. Only a

few decades later another plague struck, wiping out a further 23 percent of an already decimated population.

Not only this, but the feudal system that had been in place for so long was beginning to break down, culminating in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. During this revolt, the people of Essex and Kent descended on London, demanding the withdrawal of unfair taxes, an end to serfdom and the removal of corrupt government officials. During the riots, prisons were opened, books were burned and homes were burnt down. Abroad, the Hundred Years War with France was raging and within the Church the Great Western Schism began with tumultuous effects throughout Western Europe. For Julian it must have seemed that the whole world was disintegrating around her with religion, politics and plague spiralling ever downwards in a vicious and violent circle.

In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian tells a parable of our predicament. It is the parable of the Lord and servant and it goes something like this: 'I saw two persons in bodily likeness, that is to say, a Lord and a servant... The Lord sitteth solemnly, in rest and in peace. The servant standeth before his lord reverently, ready to do his will. The Lord looketh upon his servant full lovingly and sweetly, and meekly sendeth him into a certain place to do his will. The servant not only goes, but suddenly he starteth and runneth in great haste for love to do his lord's will. And anon, he falls into a ditch. And then he groaneth and moneth and walloweth and writheth. But he cannot rise nor help himself in any way.'

There is no wrath in this parable, only a kindly lord and a loving servant who happens to run in the wrong direction headlong into a ditch. And what does Julian go on to say? That even as we fall ever further into sin, death and hell, God himself follows us there. If Adam falls, God's Son falls into the maiden's womb and from there carries out his work of rescue and reconciliation. We might well at this moment stand blinking in the gloomy pit we find ourselves in, but can we dare to believe that this drama of sin and wrath will finally be transfigured into God's own story, a story only of love and of grace?