

A Proper 28 RCL
13 November 2011 St Michaels Studio City

God Is Already There

To make sense of today's readings we must remember that the church's year is coming to an end. Next Sunday is the last one of the old year before Advent arrives. The end of the church year puts her in mind of the end of things in general and what preparation must be made so that our end is confirmative rather condemnative.

The religious see-er, or prophet, named Zephaniah lived in one of those innumerable Old Testament periods when things had gone to rack and ruin, about 630 years before Jesus was born. The people of Israel have allowed themselves to be seduced by practices from surrounding religions and from their own selfish human nature. The first part of Zephaniah's word from God is a condemnation of God's own people; they will not be spared simply because they are God's possession. They are held to a high standard, one that they come nowhere near meeting. But the people surrounding Israel are castigated as well for a moral and cultural laxity about which they should know better. Then Jerusalem, the holy city that of all humankind should know better, is denounced for its failures, too. Pretty grim picture, isn't it? When God gets going, no one is exempt from Her demand for honor, loyalty, compassion, and mercy. That is what the church wants us to hear today. This is our calling. And for encouragement there is the end of Zephaniah's book, which has a very different tone, one of encouragement, one of strength for the journey. Listen to some of those verses: "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,... The Lord is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.... He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love;... I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.... I will bring you home..." (3.15-20)

It is the part of wisdom to know that God has standards, that as His people we are held to those standards, that we are purified of our brokenness by God's annealing fire of love whose heat sometimes feels like anger – this is the wisdom that our Psalm 90 reading enjoins on us.

Our First Thessalonians reading 670 years after Zephaniah also talks about the end of things and makes much the same point. Darkness and its people will be judged and rejected. Light and its people will be confirmed in their creative cooperation with God. God is in the business of turning darkness into light, weak and evil people into heroes and heroines, ordinary clay into glorious saints. It is what that old-fashioned word "grace" means: God's good will, divine good intentions. God intends, in the words of First Thessalonians, "to have our Lord Jesus Christ save us. Christ died for us, so that we could live with him, whether we are alive or dead when he comes." (5.9-10)

Jesus was also aware of the end of things, that the world is not eternal, that the commixture of good and evil we know as human existence will come to an eventual end, and that we are each of us called to work for that transformation. God condemns the evil in our world just as surely as in Zephaniah's; the evil that is in us should take warning and change (repent is the biblical term). God approves and shores up the good in our world just as surely as in Zephaniah's; the good that is in us should take heart, rejoice, and expand, for God is well pleased. God's Spirit and Power work in Jesus for the world's re-creation, and that means, since we are the body of Jesus in today's world, that we are

working for the same transfiguration. We have not been put here just for our own pleasure and glory. We have been put here to help one another work through the destiny that is ours as children of God.

Jesus' parable tells us that we are not meant to sit lazily on our spiritual thrones but to labor in the vineyard, to serve, to love, to be compassionate, to sacrifice, to die, and to live again. The equipment we have to accomplish this work varies from one person to the next, and different results will be expected. We don't have to worry about the results. We have to worry about the attempt. We have to try. Like the boy with five loaves and two fish, the materials may be inadequate, but God will give the increase, if we trust Him and ourselves. That was the third man's failure in the parable: he didn't trust himself and he didn't trust God.

We have better reason than he to throw ourselves into the fray. We have seen Jesus give His all. We have even seen Him "fail," as He dies a premature, ignominious death on a shameful Roman cross. We have seen a decomposing corpse in a stone tomb. We have seen the disciples, the hope of the future, scattered in fear and confusion. And then we have seen it all reversed in a glorious burst of life energy on a Sunday morning in ancient Jerusalem. What was dead now lives and breathes; what was blue and cold is now warm and supple; what was all aching emptiness now fills the universe with its joy and energy. We know this. We have seen it. We have heard it and its results.

And so we have every reason, much more than the timorous man of the parable, to test our mettle, to attempt the fray, to invest ourselves, to give it our all. That is what is asked of us: the attempt, the endeavor, the undertaking. Even if we fail, as Jesus did, there is resurrection. In God's mysterious purposes, what we are and what we do, how we fail and how we flourish, are but the inadequate loaves and fishes in the face of a gigantic task. But God's Word, God's Power, God's Love, will make it all happen, will nourish the needy, will create peace and beauty, because that is what God's Word always does. And then, because there is such abundance, we will gather up twelve baskets full of leftovers. It is God's way with us.

We have no need to be afraid of ends – nor of beginnings, for that matter. God is already there. One of the greatest poets of the last century put it this way, "In my beginning is my end." (T.S. Eliot, East Coker) And we might well reply, "Yes, Mr Eliot, and in our end is our beginning." Because God is already there.

Next Sunday we end the year. But that is merely the necessary requirement for beginning the next chapter in the adventure, the advent of next year. God is never defeated by the end of things, and neither should we be overcome. God always brings resurrection, a new beginning, the advent of greater life, fuller life, holier life. That is what God does to us. That is what God does for us. That is the work God calls us to share in, so that all others will be re-born, resurrected, safely gathered in to the kingdom of God, where ends are never threatening, where ends are the necessary conditions for new and great and glorious beginnings, where we live and love eternally. In the name of God, compassionate, merciful, loving – our savior. Amen.