

Be happy. Be scared. Be kind.

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, 15th December 2024, 8.30am Service

Readings [Zephaniah 3.14–end](#), [Luke 3.7–18](#)

How should we be feeling just now? According to our Bible readings: first, be happy; secondly, be scared.

The prophet Zephaniah is all about happiness, and some of his words about God gathering outcasts and bringing joy could have been written for people in Syria. The past week has seen thousands crossing back over the border into their homeland, now the evil dictator is gone, and scenes of jubilation after Friday prayers.

Be happy, then. But Christian communities and others in Syria cannot just be happy; there is apprehension too. Their new masters are saying good things, but do they mean them? And even if they do, will others let them do them? So, be happy; and be scared.

The scary stuff today comes from Luke's gospel and John the Baptist, in whose honour we light our third Advent candle.

Now John offers people baptism, and so do we. If you are a new parent enquiring about baptism for your child and you go on our [website](#), you read that 'we at St Marylebone would be delighted to be part of this journey with you.' We have what in church-speak is called an 'open' baptism policy.

When the crowds come to John the Baptist enquiring about baptism, he says, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?' (Perhaps we should get Pam and Claire in the parish office to quote him, next time someone rings about a christening.)

John operates what we would call a 'rigorist' baptism policy. He is rigorous because he knows what comes next; or, rather, who comes next: the one who comes after him, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, who will purify them and sift them and transform them. So you've come to be baptised, says John – do you realise what you are getting into?

In Luke's gospel what comes next is just that, the arrival of Jesus, but it is the adult Jesus. Turn the page from today's reading in chapter 3 and you'll find him in his hometown of Nazareth ([Luke 4.16-30](#)). At first they think he is amazing; minutes later, they try to throw him off a cliff. Jesus, it seems, is a rather disturbing adult.

For us too, what comes next is Jesus – it's going to be acted out in our Nativity play at the 11 o'clock service – but this is the arrival of Jesus the baby, who

makes you feel warm inside and even brush away a tear, rather than the young prophet who causes a gulp of fear to those who take him seriously. Yet it is only because of the prophet that we remember the baby at all.

So, Jesus is coming: therefore be happy – and be scared. How do we get ready for this arrival?

There are nine shopping days to Christmas as we approach the height of our annual experiment with urgency. John talks of the wrath to come, and these days running up to December 25th have their own mock day of wrath: there are certain things that just have to be done before Christmas, and if you don't do them – send those cards, wrap those presents – you will be judged (perhaps by the person sitting next to you, if not by God).

We can exaggerate the importance of this urgent stuff – after all, if you miss the Christmas post it's not the end of the world – but it's all a kind of parable to remind us that one day it will be: one day (perhaps unimaginably far off) it will be the end of the world for the human race; long before that may come the end of certain ways of living in the world, because our shared life on this planet has a fragility about it; and, perhaps before that, it may be the end of the world for me, because each human life is itself a finite, fragile thing.

The crowds ask John, 'What then should we do?' and so must we. In the face of life, finite and fragile – my life, and the lives of those I care about – how should I live now?

John's answers are not the ones you get from some weird cult leader. They are not fantastical but practical, doable; they are about clothes and food and money: share what you've got if others need it; don't be greedy, don't grab more than is your due. And if you wonder how to respond to John's commands, just look on today's Weekly Bulletin [or the online [Portico](#) newsletter].

John says, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone that has none;' likewise with food.

We say, Christmas can be a time when some of us are scared about making ends meet, so help our [Miracles in Marylebone](#) project spread hope instead of fear by donating vouchers for toys, warm clothes or food. And if you are scared about what is happening to our climate (and we all should be) see the weekly feature *Steps towards a greener St Marylebone*.

John's message is one of fear, but it is creative fear. John hints at the one who is coming after him, and makes him sound pretty scary too; which in a sense he is: Jesus will frighten friend and foe with his message of the Kingdom of God, a place of gifts not wages, a state where the only entry qualification is to accept that you are accepted.

That is the word of love God speaks; and at 11 o'clock this morning, and even in more in nine days' time, we shall hear again how that Word was made flesh among us ([John 1.1-14](#)).

Meanwhile, remember the words of John the Baptist, and also remember these words of poet Philip Larkin,

we should be careful
Of each other, we should be kind
While there is still time.

[The Mower](#)