

Easter 2/3 2021 - Emmanuel

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Zephaniah 3 vv 14-20 p947 Acts 3 vv 12-19 p1095
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	I John 3 vv 1-7 (not read) Luke 24 vv 36-48 p1062

ALMIGHTY God, who has given thine only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an ensample of godly life; Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

When I was thinking about today's sermon, the words that sprang out at me from the readings were these from Zephaniah: *the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee.* That's what we need to know, that God is with us, that God is among us, that God is within us. The very name the prophet Isaiah bestows on Jesus is *Emmanuel, which being interpreted is God with us.* Today's Gospel began with the words, *And as they spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.* The epistle appointed for today (which we didn't read, John's first letter, the beginning of chapter 3) says, *Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not.* A little bit before that John says, *But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you.* He in us and we in Him, *the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee.* We live in the Presence of God. Jesus is here present with us - in this Church, in this Sacrament, in His Holy Word, yes, all of those and He is always present with us wherever we go, whatever we do, wherever we are. Jesus is with us. He is among us. He is within us. He says, before His Ascension, *and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.* *Amen.*

Those words *the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee* sprang out at me because it is so important in these difficult times to know that the Lord is with us. We've been through a lot with COVID. We're still going through a lot. Several of us have other problems to worry about than COVID at this time, some of them even more serious. The death of the Duke of Edinburgh has been a sobering and moving experience for us. As we've thought about his long life - from troubled childhood, through serving as a naval officer in the war, to marrying the Princess Elizabeth and becoming her consort on her accession to the throne, serving (in her words) as her strength and stay, serving this nation, the commonwealth and the wider world, supporting youth through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme, promoting conservation by his role in the Worldwide Fund for Nature, his patronage of and interest in many charitable causes, and his encouragement of industry, science and a whole range of other worthwhile endeavours - we've not only admired Prince Philip's own commitment and sense of duty, we've also been reminded of some of the challenges which our nation and the wider world have lived through in the last hundred or so years. Our own memories of our own experiences and those of our families have been reawakened.

It matters a lot to know that in all that has happened, in all that is happening and in all that will happen *the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee.*

But I didn't want to take this promise out of context. I didn't want to presume on the prophet's words. So I looked back at what went before the reading we had this morning, which is only the last seven verses of the entire Book of Zephaniah, which consists of three

chapters. The first chapter makes grim reading. God has commissioned the prophet to warn of terrible judgment coming on the land. Why should that be? Men and women have forgotten the LORD. They are defying the LORD and disobeying His Laws. They are worshipping idols, false gods,. They deny God's power. They *say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil.* They deny the reality of judgment and believe that silver and gold will deliver them from their troubles. Denying the reality of God's Justice and Mercy, they similarly treat one another without respect. Violence, dishonesty, greed, selfishness, indifference to the plight of the poor, naturally follow on from rejection of God Who made rich and poor alike and commands us to look after one another.

Chapter 2 begins with an exhortation to repentance. This judgment which is coming will fall not only on Israel, but on the surrounding nations also. These too have defied the LORD. If the people of Israel want to escape the coming disaster, they must repent of their sins before God. The Final Judgment will fall on the whole world. If we want to escape the coming punishment, we must repent of our sins before God.

Returning to Jerusalem in the earlier part of chapter 3, the word God gives to Zephaniah to preach to the people is that too many of their preachers and teachers, the ministers of religion they choose to listen to, are evading the truth. They are not speaking for God. They are preserving their own status and popularity by distorting the Word of the LORD, omitting the bits about needing to repent of our sins against God and our fellow human beings, promising that it will all be all right even if human beings continue to reject God and abuse one another. Yes, says Zephaniah, the LORD is in the midst of us, but He is a just God and He cannot abide injustice. We are in the Presence of God. However, *Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not; whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.*

The Jews of Jesus' own days didn't recognise the Lord Emmanuel. After He had risen from the dead and the Holy Spirit had descended on the Church, they couldn't deny that the apostles were doing great miracles, but they still didn't believe. Instead, they tried to silence the apostles. Peter says: *Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.*

Zephaniah again, the last part of chapter 3 which we heard read today: ¹⁴ *Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.*

¹⁵ *The Lord hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more.*

Wonderful promises, wonderful and true. God is with us. He is looking after us. He forgives us from all our sins. In Him, we have no fear of sin, the world and devil. He has overcome death itself. As His people, as the people of God, however, it is our calling to live up to what it means to be His children. *Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy.*

If we want to receive His wonderful promises in all their fulness, we have to turn unreservedly to Him and accept His Will for our lives. This we can only do by His grace.