

COMING HOME TO GOD

Advent III

St Michael's Cornhill

Sung Eucharist

Sunday December 13th 2015

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Many years ago, when our two sons were quite young, we went on our first adventurous holiday, camping in mainland Europe. Our farthest flung destination was Assisi, birthplace of St. Francis, and placed stunningly halfway up a mountain overlooking the plain of Umbria. We camped in a beautiful campsite in an olive grove, and while we were there got to know another family, Bob and Sally, who had three young girls. I suppose our two were about six and eight years old.

In the end we struck up a good friendship with Bob and Sally and met up a number of times over the years. This continued but eventually we fell out of touch. However, just a few months ago I emailed Bob to see how they were. There was sad news amongst the good news. Sally had been stricken twice by cancer but seemed now to be well. Saddest of all was the news that Sarah the youngest of all, had died two years ago in her mid-thirties of cancer.

More recently still, we were in touch again and Bob and Sally were keen to meet up. But, Bob said, there was one thing he had to say before we all met. In the past, knowing that I was a clergyman, he'd protested clearly, but not aggressively, his agnosticism. Often we'd joke about his local church, with the vicar being the butt of some of the humour, albeit in a generous fashion! But in this latest email he reflected with great humility:

'As you can probably imagine, Sarah's illness and death changed everything for us. 50 years of agnosticism could not withstand such a thing. Not only is God and the Church now central to our lives, but I am also a churchwarden.'

I found his note very powerful indeed. For not only was it moving and humbling, it also felt for Bob rather like 'coming home' - coming home to God, that is.

That first reading from the prophet Zephaniah in a message of great encouragement, used just such words:

'Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exalt with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

At that time *I will bring you home*, at that time I will gather you . . .when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.'

Of course, part of that message is a literal reflection on Israel's ill-fortune. Those exiled from their homeland would return. But there is a deliberate ambiguity in the prophet's message. For it is also about *coming home to the God and Father* who is both Creator and Redeemer of Israel as a nation.

The second brief reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians is equally full of joy and hope:

'Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say, Rejoice,'

All this has been chosen for today, of course, as we draw ever closer to the birth of the Christ child – indeed as we approach that moment when God comes among us, as *one of us*. The one who creates *all*, that is the entire universe, now comes again to reconcile all. It really

is a message of coming home. Of course, only a glance at the gospel passage seems to suggest something rather more robust, more challenging and even at some points terrifying! Once again it's the Baptist, whom a number of us encountered in our readings last week. The Baptist begins

‘You brood of vipers!’

Not an encouraging start. . . . Then a line or two later:

‘Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire . . . the chaff will be burnt with unquenchable fire.’

The Baptist's message is always powerful, and often frightening – but it is also in spite of this, encouraging: ‘One mightier than he is coming – and he will gather the wheat into his granary. . .’ and ‘so with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.’

So, at the heart there is good news, but it comes with a challenge. Part of this is a moral challenge – repentance is a key element to John's message. But part of the challenge is also about the varied tapestry of human life. I began with that story which was a personal encounter with suffering, loss and grief. There are many other examples. Each of you will have encountered grief and suffering either directly or indirectly. We've had more than our share in the past few months.

Some twenty years ago, I remember reading of another celebrated ‘coming home’. It related to the writer Philip Toynbee. Some of you will remember Philip Toynbee, reviewer and critic for the Observer newspaper. Son of the historian Arnold Toynbee, Philip came from a freethinking and sceptical family. Polly Toynbee, still well-known for her fairly radical contempt of religion is his daughter. Philip was similar, and then - in his mid-sixties – largely through his friendship with some contemplative sisters on the borders of Wales in Monmouthshire, he came to faith. He wrote this up in his attractive journalistic style in a diary which he called simply *Part of a Journey*. Almost as he completed it, he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He continued his diary, and it was later published under the title *End of a Journey*. It was a real coming home.

Philip had discovered by the prompting of the life and prayers of the sisters of Tymayr Covent what it meant that God had come among us in our own humanity in Jesus. In his last months he lived through the pain and challenge of life in Christ.

So, as we approach the great day when the babe is born, we also do so with both the pain and challenge of the Baptist but also the joy and sense of coming home of Zephaniah and St. Paul. So we say in the great Advent proclamation:

Amen, even so, come Lord Jesus.

Readings

Zephaniah. 3. 14-20.

Philippians. 4. 4-7.

Luke. 3. 7-18.