

## **BE SILENT!**

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday November 16<sup>th</sup> 2014

There's an old tale of two very naughty young boys – Jack and Tom. Jack is three and Tom five. Any mischief that happens locally and the parents know it'll likely be Jack and Tom. So, Mama sends Jack, the three year old to see the vicar. The vicar's a huge great chap with a booming voice. Sitting Jack down sternly he asks: 'Do you know where God is, Jack?' Jack is speechless, wide-eyed and mouth open. Piercing the silence the vicar asks still more sternly: 'Where is God?' More terror, more silence. Once more and louder still with pointed finger, the parson demands an answer: 'Where is God?' Jack runs off and hides himself in the cupboard where Tom finds him. He says, in terrified tones to Tom: 'GOD is missing, and they think we did it!

It's a great tale and it's believable. For one attribute that has often been assigned to God is that of wrath, of anger – almost capricious anger, at times. Today's readings all breathe something of that feeling. That marvellously resonant piece of prophecy from Zephaniah, often used to begin Advent carol processions - and spoken out of darkness: '*Be silent* before the Lord God', and then more portentous words about the future follow. Or, in the famous parable of the talents – which could be taken to support various financial shenanigans of the sort we've sadly heard too much of in recent years. Here, Jesus' words sound ominous and threatening – not of the cunning servant but instead of the rather pathetic and slothful one at the end. The master says: 'Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'

Even the Pauline piece has its menacing overtones: 'The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders.' Follow this, and you will be in danger of God's wrath and judgement. There is no doubt that *fear* is a key word in both Testaments and it is the fear of God. 'The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom,' we are told.

But before we take this to be the universal and bleak description of a vengeful God, let's listen rather more carefully. For the prophet continues to ask Israel to seek the Lord, for the Lord is a Lord of hope. In Matthew's story of Jesus and the parable of the talents, there is a very positive and hopeful message too. Those servants who have heeded God's voice, those who have been open to God's grace will receive of the generosity which is paramount in God's nature. The gift of Jesus Christ is the ultimate sign of this to all humankind.

The epistle we heard too is not about a bleak and hopeless future. It is rather warning all not to be misled by false prophets, so-called wonder workers, wizards, magicians and fortune-tellers. As we dig deeper, we begin to understand more richly and intelligently about what the fear of God means. Essentially it is about listening to and respecting God, of opening our minds and hearts to God's generosity in Jesus Christ.

In many ways, we have the good fortune to live in an amazing world and an equally amazing creation. Open our eyes in this great city – or as we travel across our own land and the riches of our world truly evoke wonder. Or, reflect only briefly on what - through God's grace -

humanity has achieved and still achieves through technology, through progress in medical science and now through our digital advances.

But alongside this – and almost within it – the voice of God is almost drowned out by wave upon wave of fêting celebrities, of finding ever new ways to dull our sense to the wonders before us. But it was ever so! Listen again to the prophet: ‘Be silent before the Lord God.’ Make time, make space to attend, for in the silence God’s voice may be heard. As we get older, our capacity for wonder seems to diminish, to be drowned by the noise of our world. The Welsh Anglican poet R.S. Thomas captured this uniquely in his *Children’s Song*:

‘We live in our own world  
A world which is too small  
For you to stop and enter  
Even on hands and knees,  
The adult subterfuge.  
And though you probe and pry  
With analytic eye,  
And eavesdrop all our talk  
With an amused look,  
You cannot find the centre  
Where we dance, where we play,  
Where life is still asleep  
Under the closed flower,  
Under the smooth shell  
Of eggs in the cupped nest  
That mock the faded blue  
Of your remoter heaven.’

So Thomas, the poet like Zephaniah the prophet, bids us be silent, and to open ourselves to the fear of God. That fear is not of anger and wrath, but instead an attitude of quiet, silence and stillness to listen for God’s voice. Suppose we were to allow such a silence even for just ten minutes in each day. We are getting closer to that season when God unexpectedly spoke out of a tiny babe - uniquely and to transform our universe. Be silent, be attentive, listen and watch for the appearing of Jesus who changed our universe forever.

Amen

Readings

Zephaniah. 1. 7, 12-end

II Thessalonians. 2. 1-11

Matthew. 25. 15-30

Zephaniah. 1. 7, 12-end