

Zephaniah 3 v 14 to end

Matthew 21 1-9

Prayer

I hope you that you are enjoying this year of journeying through the bible with some characters and books from the Old Testament and New. Feedback from the church council was very positive; it's a challenge for us preachers and I feel like I have learned a lot. I hope you do too.

I remembered I was preaching- halfway through my reading week, when I was away from my theology books and from being online with my computer, so this is more from the heart. As I pondered, I decided, not only to write a little about Matthew, but also to do a "half time" summary for the year and the themes. In Advent we shall return to the lectionary which is the Church of England's prepared readings which rotate each three years; meaning us preachers preach on the same passages 3 times in nine years. So this year has been a real breath of fresh air for me.

However preaching is not simply teaching, it is not simply about what we think about the passage, it is about giving God space to speak to His people through us. Some of the best comments I have ever had about my preaching have been about things I didn't say but which God said to someone's heart through me. That is the work of the Holy

Spirit and we trust and pray that the Holy Spirit has been at work this year.

Today I have chosen a passage from Zephaniah – I wonder how many of you have read this book; right at the end of the Old Testament, but I imagine all of you are familiar with this passage part of which is read at our Christmas services, and is another example of how the Old Testament looks forward to the Messiah who is Jesus.

The theme of Zephaniah, like many of the minor prophets, is that Religion is not a private affair between us and God, it is how we treat our neighbour, it is about how we conduct our business, it is about how we live our lives. If we don't follow God's ways in loving our neighbour as ourselves, then there are consequences. In the Old Testament the consequences can be personal – such as Cain killing Abel, or widespread such as the Babylonians taking Israel into servitude.

God rescued his people from themselves time and time again and kept reminding them that He was going to do a new thing, God would be with them Immanuel- God with us, Jesus was not a Plan B because plan A did not work. Jesus was plan A and he is implicit in the whole Old Testament. The process of salvation does not begin with Jesus- Jesus is the coming together of all the teaching and themes that have gone before. That is why it is so important for Christians to read the Old Testament and to

understand their relationship in God's plan of salvation; they can speak to us.

The Holy Spirit did not first appear at Pentecost. The Spirit is God's hand in creation, is God's voice through the prophets, is God's wisdom in the psalms, Proverbs, Job Ecclesiasticus and Song of Songs.

The Trinitarian God is present in the whole of scripture and Matthew, our Gospel writer wants his Jewish readers to know that. We as a ministry team wanted this year to help you explore that, there are not two God's – an angry one of the Old Testament and benevolent one in the New.

There is simply a better understanding of God developing through Jesus' seeing, feeling, and listening to God made man rather than mediated through prophets and priests. Evil is not ascribed to God's punishment in the NT (albeit there are a few examples of this) but to the spiritual battle that is a feature of our world and our own lives; surely we all identify with Paul " Lord why do I do the things I don't want to do and don't do the things I should"

Now we turn to who is Matthew - the tradition that the author of this gospel was Matthew the disciple began with Christian Bishop Papias (100-140AD) who wrote that the apostle began collecting Jesus sayings as they had been written down in Hebrew. But the jury is out on this one; Matthew's gospel appears to have been written in Greek not translated from Hebrew and the author does not hint that he is an eyewitness. Whoever wrote it- they did a

good job, and they did the work of God using Mark and an unseen source know as Q, to write a unique and detailed account.

Of all four gospels Matthew is the most "Jewish", even his genealogy begins with Abraham, the Father of the Jewish faith, whereas Luke's gospel begins with Adam; the father of humankind.

Matthew is clearly writing to Jewish communities to show that Jewish scripture (our Old Testament) is fulfilled.

His opening words are "The family tree of Jesus Christ, David's Son, Abraham's son" clearly setting out the Jewish heritage of Jesus. In chapter one- three the writer quotes Isaiah, Micah, Hosea and Jeremiah. Imagine how powerful those chapters about Jesus' genealogy and birth would have been to Jewish listeners. The identity of Jesus as promised Messiah was established. Then Matthew takes time to explore John the Baptist- already accepted as a prophet in the tradition of Elijah by Matthews readers; it is not until Chapter 4 that Jesus' ministry is written about.

But how wonderfully Matthew writes; he devotes three chapters on the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' teaching; that is Matthews' gift to us.

Matthew is also the only gospel writer to mention the word "church" in chapter 16 and chapter 18. That is because this gospel is written after the fall of Jerusalem, and after the Pharisees had taken over struggling Judaism and expelled Christians from the synagogues. Interestingly although it is the only gospel to establish Peter as "The Rock on which Jesus will build His Church" it is written well after Peter has been martyred. Matthew writes not only for Jews but also for the fledgling Christian churches, to give them identity and a code of practice- in fulfilment of the Law (Matthew 5.17)

Matthew is writing to communities of faith to give them their history in more detail than Mark's gospel which has less "law" and nothing of the Jewish heritage or birth narrative. Matthew does use Mark as a source but gives far more time and space to what he considers important for his readers to know of Jesus, his life, heritage, teaching and finally, their and our commission "to make believers in all the world and baptise them in the name of Father Son and Holy Spirit" . Matthew is also the only gospel writer to write about final judgment in chapter 25 where we are challenged to be sheep not goats and care for the:

Hungry

Thirsty

Homeless

Naked

Sick

Imprisoned

If one wanted a rule of life- Matthews' gospel is the most detailed on what to do and how to do it

If one wanted an exposition of the link between the Old Testament and the New- Matthew is the most detailed.

If one wanted a biography of Jesus Matthew is the most detailed; although Matthew tells us that the story of Jesus doesn't begin with Jesus in human form in the gospels, Jesus has been around since the before the beginning of time, he was, he is, and he is to come.

And if you want the Word of God to speak to you, then Matthew is a pretty good place to start, and that's what the bible is all about; a way for God to speak to God's people; you and me. Amen