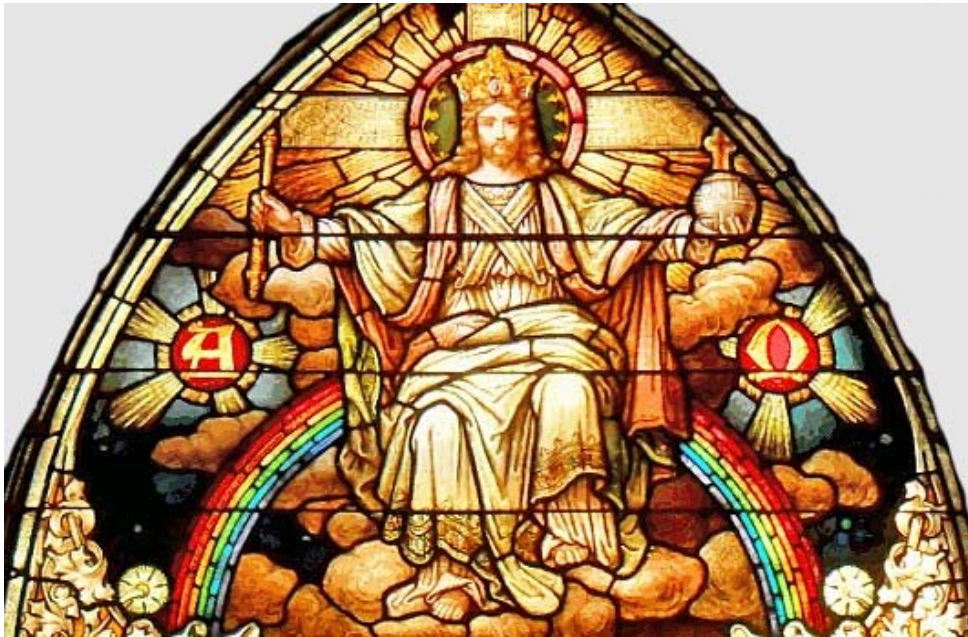


Study 3 – Participation



Jesus Christ the King in Glory, St Mary's RC Church in Fredericksburg, Texas

*'Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.'
(Philippians 4:5)*

a) Be glad and rejoice!

Zephaniah 3:14-20

These are words of encouragement, but they follow an outpouring of anger and frustration from the prophet regarding Jerusalem and its population, 'She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord; she does not draw near to her God' (v 2). And yet 'the Lord within her is righteous... morning by morning he dispenses justice' (v 5).

It is clear that there will be judgement, followed by a time of restoration for the remnant of Israel, now a scattered nation, and a purification so that 'all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve

him shoulder to shoulder' (v 9). It is into this context that Zephaniah brings hope of a messianic era, a time of great joy, where the Lord will forever be with his people. Hands will no longer hang limp but be raised in joy as God, the Mighty Warrior, brings salvation. Fear and sorrow will disappear, to be replaced by a time of great rejoicing.

God's promise is summed up in the last verse. He will do all this, fulfilling his purposes with his people, and it is this promise that is the basis of their hope and joy.

b) The Lord is near

Philippians 4:4-7

In week two of the study, Paul was acknowledging the importance of his partnership in mission with the believers in Philippi and expressed his grateful thanks for their generosity and assistance. Now, in his closing words he offers guidelines for daily life that are as relevant now as they were in those early days of Christian fellowship.

Zephaniah encouraged worship, and that's at the forefront of Paul's mind, so that God's peace might be established in their hearts. He repeats that one word, 'Rejoice!' and it may be that as he languishes in prison, Paul's thoughts turn

to the future as the Philippians continue their journey of faith and the highs and lows that they will inevitably experience. The 'gentleness' that he wants the world to see does not translate easily, but it talks of a humility that does not differentiate between people, shows equal consideration and gentleness to all, and in doing so can even disarm an adversary.

Rejoice because the Lord is near is a reference to Jesus' return. Nearness is a relative concept of course, but this will be the next event to take place in salvation history, and Paul's words encourage confidence, endurance and hope.

c) What should we do...?

Luke 3:7-18

We have been introduced to John as 'A voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord..."' (v 4) and now we hear the message John brings from God, and it's not what we might label as 'good news'. However, it is one that would grab the headlines as news spread around the area.

There is the call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but also a need to reject the belief that being a Jew made you different insofar as what you could or could not do within society. The Jews held firmly to the view that God would judge them differently to other nations as they were his chosen people, but John tells them that there's no such thing as racial privilege in God's standards of judgement.

In a short question and answer session, John gives the crowd some pointers as to how they might improve their image in God's eyes. It is a social gospel which is about sharing with others rather than hoarding riches, doing an honest day's work and not exploiting or abusing others. Let faith shine through your daily labour.



Anthony van Dyck *St Martin sharing cloak with a beggar* 1621

Of course this wasn't the Messiah laying down the ground rules, John was simply the messenger, and before this momentous day their lives needed to turn around, focussed on God rather than self, and the baptism he offered was a visual sign of their desire that this should happen.

Traditions #3 The Advent Calendar

The idea of an Advent calendar marking the days leading up to Christmas has been around since the late 19th century in Germany when Lutherans would make chalk marks on doors from the 1st to 24th of December. At this time the mother of Gerhard Lang hand made a calendar for her son, sticking 24 sweets to a square of cardboard. Later, as an adult, he and a friend opened a printing office and in



Advent Calendar covering first Sunday in Advent to Epiphany, artist: Paula Jordan

1908 produced what is thought to be the first printed Advent Calendar, with small pictures behind 24 little doors. Variations of these soon appeared, some with pictures and others with biblical verses behind the doors. Today, it would seem the tradition has gone full circle, with sweets being an incentive to purchase one as a gift.



They say...

'Next, the second coming says that the ultimate word in history is the triumph of God, the reign of God's kingdom, the eternal and lasting rule of the good. Here is where our Advent meditation rests. By faith we are promised that evil will be judged and done away with and all will be made whole. This is the vision we want to carry with us as we view the news and visit the hospitals, psychiatric wards, and prisons of our world. Christian hope is an optimism about life that is grounded in Christ and celebrated again and again in the liturgy of the church.' (Robert E. Webber)