

From ferocity to generosity

Sunday 16th December 2018 All Saints Kings Heath

Zephaniah 3:14-end

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

Why "vipers"? (A bit harsh, John.) They are venomous and, if surprised by a threat, will strike out. If looking for dinner, they will use surprise and strike, paralyse, then eat. It is a vivid and unpleasant image of pure selfishness; pure self-preservation and it turns our stomach. "Who warned you to come?" he shouts, seeing their religious life as self-preservation rather than devotion. Most fiercely, he challenges the puffed up self-image that is made of nothing but nostalgia: "Don't tell me who your ancestors were. WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?" A prophet challenges a nostalgic nation? Well, what possible relevance could this scripture have?

But suddenly, after fierce, challenging language he changes tone the moment people ask him "What shall we do?" and his answers are disarmingly simple. Share if you have more than enough. Tax collectors, take only your due. Soldiers, don't bully. Very simple. But hold on a minute, there is a real shock in each of these.

Think of these three terrible phrases: Fair Trade. What a shock that most trade being unfair is normalised. The fundamental bias to the rich in our economy is appallingly highlighted by the fact that "Fair Trade" is used like a high standard, a quality marque when it should be tautology.

How about "Affordable Housing." This small extra, added grudgingly to any new housing development is a judgement on the housing market as a whole. In that self-congratulatory little phrase we judge the scandal of homelessness in Britain and the absurd normalisation of in-work poverty.

How about that most chilling "Conventional weapons." Oh, you're going to blow up my home, burn off my flesh and poison the soil with discarded ordinance so there are defects at birth for generations to come **conventionally**? That's all right then."

As John addresses the crowd, what is truly shocking is that hoarding when others are cold and hungry is normalised. Taking more than your due is normalised. Bullying is normalised. Shouldn't these three suggestions be obvious? They're not a high standard. They should be the normal base line. Selfishness is normalised. That is the terrible place we are in.

A second thing that is very striking is that John doesn't distinguish between those who might think themselves ordinary and those who have

deeply distasteful jobs. They, too, have something very simple to do, something perfectly manageable that will make a difference to others' lives.

The third shock is that that tax collector collaborators and even soldiers, agents of brutal occupation, are there at all, and make the moving supplication: "what shall we do?"

There's also a soldier in Zephaniah. Judah is fixated on the military power of neighbours, so the prophet casts God as a mighty warrior coming to sweep everything away (chapter 1), but this greatest of all soldiers is, startlingly, a warrior who sings. His aim is restoration of a city that jolly well doesn't deserve it, calling it a "soiled, defiled, oppressing city". (3:1) Having lured their gaze away from the soldiers around them, Zephaniah presents a vision of a God-Warrior defining his military success as "saving the lame, gathering the outcast and, far from bullying, relieving people's shame (3:19) and the once ashamed city is having a party (3:18). From self-preoccupation, Judah's gaze is lifted to God, and in thankful praise, perspective is restored and the lame and outcasts find their proper place is a sign of the community's new health. Prophecy to snap a nation out of self-obsession: what possible relevance could this scripture have?

There are two soldiers in Philipians. Paul writes deeply encouragingly about what kind of bearing believers in Christ will show if they trust he rose again for them, for Jew and Gentile and all the world. He describes a kind of disciplined joy, a resilient habit of thanksgiving, a constant turning to God candid about our need, and "gentleness," a refusal to meet insult with insult (4:4-6). But far from naive, Paul writes from prison, a soldier (notionally at least) at his door. He knows he probably won't see his friends again so the Greek he chooses, "Rejoice" χαίρετε also has overtones of "farewell". Rome wants him isolated and frightened of their brute force but, against the odds, Paul is offering an antidote to victimhood.

He insists on prayer, a defiance of the limits of worldly imagination; he insists on supplication, such vulnerability to God a defiance of military machismo; he insists on thanksgiving, in defiance of scarcity and jealousy.

Most of us are not in mortal danger for our faith but, if gloomy about the social and political world we have evolved, we may be deeply challenged by such spirituality and have to search our hearts to declare our vulnerability to God, and dig deep to find things defiantly to give thanks for.

The second soldier in Philipians is God. Like Zephaniah, Paul describes God as "guard[ing] your hearts" (4:7). How gloriously funny is that, Paul

reaching for the very image of the soldier at his door and turning it into an emblem of his freedom in the world.

As we feel the soldier motif working on our hearts through each reading, suddenly there's a shock again, hearing the soldiers of Jesus' day ask "what shall we do?" The Gospel is for those with distasteful jobs as well as for the ordinary crowd.

As flimsy boats cross not the Mediterranean but the English Channel, I wonder what John would say to a border agency official asking "what shall we do?"

Our Prime Minister works away at the impossible task set by the referendum, after her colleagues' letters declaring "no confidence" piled up enough to trigger Wednesday's vote. That she clung on leaves some full of admiration, others with frustration. On she goes like a doomed alchemist trying to find the magic formula to turn all to gold. What would John's word be to our MPs at the moment if they stopped to ask him "What should we do?"

After several convictions this week here and abroad after terrifying violence against women and children, guards are going to lock those convicted in their cells. What would John's word be to any prison guard asking "what should we do?"

Yes even those in distasteful and unpopular roles receive a response from John. Imagining who they are today, it is a serious exercise to try and distil what John's call would be into a brief phrase like these: stop hoarding and normalise sharing; he calls the tax collector to normalise honesty, so becoming part of the social solution that tax can provide; he asks the soldiers to normalise restraint so they become protectors instead of bullies.

So, Zephaniah, Paul and John compel us to consider what wrong assumptions have been normalised, and who is trying to normalise limits on our imagination. They lead us from ferocity to generosity, then they beg of us "who are we and what can we do?" when all is chaos around us. After we've grumbled at how badly everyone else is doing and what everyone else needs to do to fix things, the question comes back to us. "What can we do?" What is our bearing, what is our mode of speech in this culture, this time of political dysfunction, British isolationism, sexual violence and deluded terrorism?

I know I am at risk of normalising a kind of self-righteous political bitterness in my heart at the moment. I risk normalising some kinds of laziness. As what you might call a religious professional, I am permanently at risk of using religious observance as a defensive means of

keeping God out, not letting her in to my heart. I have some searching to do.

Imagine if, the opposite of defensive/aggressive vipers, we all carried out our work and vocations with the question "How can my conduct make this role a benefit to others?" Whatever your job or calling, what do you think would John's simple suggestion be to you. But remember, even if we manage to change our behaviour and re-calibrate "normal" we should not expect congratulations. John is just making way. One is coming after him who will make a real difference. Normalising what should be so obvious, a base line, John is making way in our hearts for Jesus who brings not fairness but dazzling, burning, outrageous grace.