

Year A, Second Sunday before Advent

Zephaniah 1-7; 12-18. 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11. Matthew 25: 14-30.

A devastating prophet of doom is the virtually unknown and difficult to date prophet Zephaniah who saw the Judgements of the Lord in the affairs of history. But it's not just Zephaniah! All three readings at mass today are what you'd call *full frontal* – even Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica likens the coming of Christ to a thief in the night or the labour pains of a pregnant woman – grim indeed, and no escape. Nor, it seems, can we slip away into a comfortable parable in the gospel for today: the careful and cautious slave is roundly condemned!

If it were you or me and we were given only £300 (= 1 talent) to look after by someone we considered to be a bit of a tyrant, it might seem prudent to us, too, not to put it at risk. But, oh no, this parable isn't about being careful, it is about risking it. So although we might be tempted to feel sorry for the third servant, we are not supposed to; put nicely, we might say *nothing ventured nothing won* – but the language of the parable doesn't put it nicely: *go to hell*, says the harsh master, but with added venom!

The message from today's Gospel then is very clear: get out there and live dangerously or there will be hell to pay! And as I said, the two supporting readings do just that: they *support* a tough understanding of what is expected at the coming of the Kingdom.

The Anglican calendar for these few weeks from the last Sunday after Trinity until Advent Sunday calls this period *the Kingdom Season* and the liturgical colour is red (the fact that the Vicar likes red, or it's the colour of his eyes, has nothing to do with it)! Liturgically, red suggests fire and blood – drama and extreme cost. Are these fitting symbols for God's Kingdom, do you think? Certainly, the readings, *red in tooth and claw*, as you might describe them, back up this view.

All this prompts us to ask whether the Kingdom of God might have more in common with a Caliphate than with *a place for little children above the bright blue sky*. I raise this somewhat fearful contrast not to be offensive, but to sharpen our minds to what precisely is being presented to us in the readings and in the theology of the kingdom of God.

I hear, as you do, of the radicalization of some young Muslims, one from our nearest city – up the road in Derby, and I wonder what they see about this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland which fails to galvanize their admiration and loyalty. Well, I don't know for certain, of course, what they don't like. I do know, however, what fails to attract me and tends to *take away my pride* (to quote G K Chesterton). We seem to have such a vacuous life style, with a thorough-going celebrity culture. Most of our public statements come from our politicians with all the bombast of the bull horn – especially on foreign policy; our entertainment, while much of the world starves, is about endless different ways to cook. Meanwhile, our collective public worship appears to be centred on past wars, some of them very questionable, and is all organised by the British Legion.

There! And I'm not a radical, just from the slow, old West Country - whence bloweth the gentle zephyr; but, nevertheless, before me, whether I like it or not, is this radical parable Jesus told – and told with such vehemence!

I'm no extremist, just Church of England; but here I am sharing in this celebration of the Holy Sacrament of the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ. Perhaps it is I who need radicalizing! But perhaps the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Sacraments are, and should be, radicalizing in themselves; not into unspeakable degradation and violence, but out of any complacency and into confrontational Christian witness ... *onward Christian soldiers!*