

*“The Lord, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
he will renew you in his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing  
as on a day of festival.”*

What a joyful passage from Zephaniah, one of the Old Testament prophets - encouraging people that the Lord is with them and will renew them in his love.

So appropriate for the Easter season, where we are celebrating the joy of the risen Christ amongst us. Who says the OT is irrelevant to the New Testament or our lives today or that God is shown as a vengeful God in the OT?

Throughout the bible God has always talked to his people, had a living relationship with them and tried to guide them to follow his ways, which ultimately will be more fulfilling than our own short-term ideas of self centred contentment. God gives instructions : remember the 10 commandments, then through the OT prophets, then through Jesus , His only begotten son.

Maybe in the short term we might think we don't need God, we just get on with life, even though we're not perfect, we upset people, we grumble or gossip or complain about things. - we can party, we can get ourselves a great job, house, car , possessions, get followers on Facebook, pick and choose which more distant family members we engage with, when it suits us & so on.

But isn't it more fulfilling to have good relationships - with Jesus, with our families, our friends, with the people we work with? And if we let Jesus into our lives more, that will become easier because he will help us follow his values and his way of living in the world.

A ruler, a king(or queen) , a leader gives instructions to their people. If the ruler is good, honest and cares about all their people, things go well. If they are evil, corrupt and only want power for themselves, things go horribly wrong for the vast majority of their subjects.

God is love. He is the supreme example of a good ruler who loves his people, in fact all of his creation. *Zephaniah 15 “The Lord has taken away the judgements against you,”*

*18b “I will remove disaster from you,  
so that you will not bear reproach for it.”*

Look at the conversion of Saul we heard in the reading from Acts:

Saul, a Pharisee, a God-fearing rather extreme Jew, has been persecuting the new cult of Christians - first called The Way. He stood watching while Stephen the first Christian martyr was stoned to death and in this reading he is on his way to Damascus to arrest a few more and bring them back bound to Jerusalem.

But God through Jesus decided Saul was the person He could guide and use to convert people to following Jesus and the new Way - so Saul had an encounter with Jesus on the Road to Damascus and his life changed for ever. When the terrified Saul asks who it is, Jesus says *‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’* - Jesus forgives him for persecuting him and immediately gives him instructions to follow in order to become a disciple (through the people he will meet in Damascus) , so that Saul becomes Paul and follows Jesus.

What a remarkable event ! Nothing like that could happen now surely ?

Well with God there is always the possibility of a complete turn around of lives and yes it does!

Jonathan Aitken the former MP who spent 8 months in prison for perjury and perverting the course of justice is now an Anglican priest, and prison chaplain at Pentonville prison! God can use each of us in remarkable ways, if we turn to him and repent and trust in His mercy, because God loves us so much that he will forgive our sins, big or small and use us to help spread His kingdom on earth.

Then in the Gospel reading we see the famous 3 times forgiveness and affirmation of Peter by Jesus as *he* is commissioned by Jesus to lead the Christian church forward after Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost.

After Jesus had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and was being brought before Pilate to be judged, Peter was scared and denied 3 times that he knew Jesus.

Now, in this resurrection appearance after the joyful miraculous catch of fish brought about by Jesus, Jesus asks Peter 3 times if he loves him, in other words if he loves him enough to follow Jesus's call. Peter without hesitation says yes he loves him, and through this, Jesus is forgiving him the 3 times he denied knowing him on that dreadful night before Jesus's crucifixion.

But look at the final words in v 19 *After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'* which in fact were the same words Jesus used when he first called these fishermen disciples. Jesus is continually encouraging us all to follow him in whatever way God has planned for us.

**Forgiveness from God is followed immediately by an instruction to follow more closely;** to try again, to show true repentance and take God's forgiveness as a serious gift of love, which needs our humility and love to respond fully to it.

And things often have to be repeated in order for them to sink in.

Peter was probably so excited to see Jesus that the first time Jesus asked do you love me, he would say "Yes of course" out of joy and amazement at seeing his beloved friend and leader again. But Jesus wants to make sure he is really thinking through his answer because it has serious implications...

If Peter receives Jesus's forgiveness fully, he will then have to make a commitment to follow the instructions his leader is going to give him. So he asks him again-" yes". And again "yes". Peter is hurt that Jesus had to ask 3 times but it is making him think and this conversation will be etched in his memory. Perhaps it is only later that Peter will recognise the importance of it and how Jesus was in fact forgiving his previous weakness of denying him.

It takes courage to witness to Jesus, to speak of our faith influencing our actions, but with God's help, we **can** do it and will grow stronger within ourselves and get a sense of fulfilment that we are doing something to bring in God's kingdom.

It will probably take a year or so to get a new priest in post after Andrew leaves in June and it will take a lot of hard work to keep St Mary's ticking over now that Sharon has moved to Wales and Emma is also off to new pastures at the end of June.

So please let the joy of the Easter season enter your hearts, and keep your minds open to any Road to Damascus moments you might feel in the next few months as you continue to follow Jesus here at St Mary's! The Church wardens, Alex and I would love to hear of them!!

And remember, God continues to give instructions to all people, to you and to me, through His Holy Spirit on how to follow Him, because He loves us unconditionally and wants us to draw closer to Him, to feel comforted, valued and **inspired to help His Kingdom Come.**

In the name of the Father , and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen