

What would happen if God interrupted us?

What if God barged into the midst of our daily lives, if God made God's presence known? How would you feel? How would you respond? What change would God's presence bring? The prophet Zephaniah wrestles with these very questions. In Zephaniah's visions the presence of God brings both judgment and joy. The oracles in the majority of the book announce cosmic destruction as divine judgment<sup>1</sup>; and then in the exert from chapter 3 we hear this morning Zephaniah is filled with joy at all that is possible. These words remind the audience that the difference that God makes, the interruption in other words that God calls us to is one of joy. God is in our midst, will cast out fear and bring joy.

Zephaniah spoke to a people who did not have the promise or reassurance that Jesus bought – the reassurance we affirmed in the baptism of Alexander and Alannah last Sunday – the promise that God is in our midst and in truth is interrupting us all the time, calling us to notice what is possible, and bring joy out of fear.

This week I have spent a lot of time with a number of people whose lives have changed dramatically in a short space of time. A couple have had to come to terms with the impact of grief or aging. Some have faced change for others reasons. But in each of the conversations that I have had there has been a constant theme, while each knew that change was possible, they were also surprised by the choices they were now facing.

We all make plans for what we hope might be our future, or the future of our children, (or even our parents) but sometimes our plans are interrupted. Zephaniah invites us to ponder what shape our lives might take if we allow God to be that interruption rather than circumstance. What happens if we look at the story differently?

Today we celebrate St Anne's Day, a day we can give thanks for the life and witness of our parish, but when we can also celebrate what has been achieved, and look with hope with what is to come. Because St Anne's Day also falls on the 26<sup>th</sup> July we tend to celebrate it early while we are still together as a congregation and where we can also acknowledge the end of the academic year.

Our patron saint is someone who can inspire us, and while little is known about Anne or Joachim – Mary's parents, and Jesus grandparents. The experience of our own lives tells us that they lived through an extraordinary period. They were a couple who faced a great deal of changes and interruptions to the pattern of their lives. We do not know whether they lived to see their grandson crucified, and risen from the dead. But we do know that they had to deal with Mary's pregnancy before marriage in a society who would have shunned and excluded them for this. Yet we

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2700](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2700)

know that they did not send Mary away and consented to her marriage to Joseph. We know that they raised Mary to be open to God's call on her life, and to be able to recognise God in her midst. Anne and Mary give us an example of how we might deal with the interruption of God with joy and embracing possibility. And we know that this not always easy.

The Gospel reading for St Anne and St Joachim is one of the most unusual passages in the gospel. It is not really a narrative or even a recount, rather it is an odd explanation of the purpose of parables – in the midst of the parable of the sower – though the explanation is almost a parable in itself. In fact we have heard more than is usually set in the lectionary for St Anne. Usually we would only hear - *But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.*<sup>2</sup> The inference being of course that Anne and Mary's eyes were blessed because they were able to see the wonder of what God was revealing in their midst, in the face of adversity, fear and doubt. To have ears and eyes is an image that points beyond literal hearing to discerning the significance of Jesus' words. Jesus, though, offers no help really in interpreting this, other than to note that understanding is found in such hearing and seeing.<sup>3</sup>

Zephaniah and Matthew have a similar problem; and in fact we face a similar problem as a parish – they are trying to describe how we would live if God was in our midst when we actually believe it to be already true, but often don't know how to describe it or respond to it.

In our baptism we confirm that we will walk as children of God all the days of our lives, and as a parish in our Mission Action Plan we commit again to doing this – we say we are *constantly sharing the love of Christ*<sup>4</sup> and I think in many ways we do this – in our words and our actions. But I think at times we don't believe it; we are surprised when we find that God is in our midst. About two, maybe three years ago in a sermon I quoted a passage from an American theologian James Boyce, who asked some really interesting questions about what would happen if we could embrace that God has interrupted us, is in our midst, and is with us when the unexpected threatens to consume us.

*What if we were to see ourselves, too, as called and blessed in our encounter with God? What if we were to then know ourselves to be called by this promise and given a new identity as disciples and ambassadors of the kingdom? And what if we could then catch even a glimpse of what it means to be part of this new community<sup>5</sup>?*

I think his questions have a poignancy, so often it is easy to be negative about what we have achieved as individual Christians or as a parish – to focus on what hasn't been

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13: 16-17

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2071](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2071)

<sup>4</sup> St Anne Mission Action Plan 2016- 2019

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=981](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=981)

realised yet rather than on what is happening in our midst. Boyce challenges us to consider how different life might be if we expressed our confidence in our faith, if we lived like it made a difference to us and to others. What would Queens Park look like if we lived and shared with the joy of Christ promises in the face of all that challenges us? Would it be different in anyway?

One of the things we have been talking about in the PCC is how do we celebrate the presence that we have in the community. How do we let people know that we are hear and what we are doing? How do we let others hear and see what we hear and see? We've talked about newsletters, and opening the building up even more. One of the joys of Helen's exhibition, and the Quiz night on Friday night and a couple of other events in the past three months has been the number of people who have come into the church and said 'I didn't know this was here, or I did know you offered these groups or services'.

Confidence sometimes is just about sharing what we already have and know – as Jesus explained to the disciples; or as Zephaniah encouraged such joy and knowledge is not subdued – it is not quiet or dignified! It is a time of great jubilation. The important thing to note too is that the joy is one sided – it is not simply God's people who rejoice because God has forgiven and restored them and is in their midst, God, too, sings and shouts with joy over this love restored. The divine heart overflows with jubilation<sup>6</sup>! God is not separate from our pain or our joy – but is in the midst of it.

Today as we celebrate St Anne's day, as we give thanks for all that is good in our parish, as we mark the end of another academic year. Let us remember that God has given us eyes to see, and ears to hear. God is interrupting us! God invites us to speak with confidence, and to speak in joy. But we are also invited to notice that God sings. God shouts. God rejoices. And is too part of this celebration; even in the midst of the unexpected or unplanned. Amen

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=468](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=468)