

What happens when God interrupted us?

How do we respond when God barges into the midst of our daily lives, or makes God's presence known? How do you feel? How would do respond? 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 judgment¹; and then in the exert 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.

Five years ago as a parish we made a great lists of plans which we hoped to achieve as part of our Mission Action Plan. It was our human attempt to make space for God's presence within our lives and community. It is a strange thing then to sit back and look at how we have done, because in reality, as Zephaniah found, it is sometimes hard to deal with God's presence in our lives, and sometimes this leads to outcomes that bring hope and joy and surprise us; and sometimes we have to live with the fact that our plans, were not God's plans!

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 falls on the 26th 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 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 recognised 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

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2700

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.*² 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.³

Today I want us to spend some time considering together, what we have seen and heard and done – and also where God has interrupted us and worked within as a parish over recent years. I hope some of you noticed a display on the window at the top of the stairs which list our 9 broad goals for recent years, and I have added some picture of a few things which we can celebrate under each of these. I would like us all to consider this though, and I am going to be asking each of us to think of examples we can add to the display.

Like the rest of the Diocese of London, we sought to mould our Mission Action Plan around three key images and ideas. That we would seek to be more confident, compassionate and creative in sharing God's love in our community and in responding to God's love to us.

Our first set of Goal's then related to being Confident. We said we would do this by:

- Being good stewards
- Being a Faithful Worshipping Community
- Being Partners in the Gospel

There are lots of examples of the way that we do this. Our work with London Inter Faith Centre, our relationship with local schools, our hospitality of groups and communities within the building, working with St Andrew's, our care of the building, our financial responsibility, confirmations, baptisms, Sunday School, Queen's Park Day, weddings, the two minute slot are just a small group of examples of how we have achieved in this area. And even those thing which may have filled us with fear or concern, like the changes with St Andrew's and LIFC still bring hope for the future. On Tuesday the LIFC planned for ensuring some Inter Faith Project's continue and we already have 6 schools who want to join us again for the Story Telling Day in November which will this year be hosted by us as St Anne's. Things do change, but God still is at work in that change – surprising us.

Can you now take a moment to think of how for you, or for us a congregation you have felt encouraged by how we are confident? Think of a concrete example if you

² Matthew 13: 16-17

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2071

can. Maybe attending a confirmation at St Paul's, or an event here, or a conversation you have had. Can you then write this on your Confident card.

Our Second Goal related to Compassionate through:

- Active Social Action
- Active Local Engagement
- Active Social Life

I am constantly overwhelmed by how much this is part of our daily life here at St Anne's and in our individual lives. This is from our care of one another, providing meals or attending hospital appointments with each other; to tea and chat, or My Move, to our hospitality on Sunday Mornings, to our missional giving to many projects financially, to our extensive practical and financial support of Laurence's Larder, Refugee's, vulnerable people. The challenge in this area is that the more you do, the more it feels that there is yet to do – the level of need for compassion feels very weighty. But like Zephaniah we need to ensure that this does not overwhelm us, and we find hope in what we have been able to do.

Can you now take a moment to think of how for you, or for us a congregation you have felt encouraged by how we are compassionate? Think of a concrete example if you can. Maybe collecting bread, talking to a homeless person, donating for a donkey, or harvest festival or a community space or a conversation you have had. Can you then write this on your Compassion card.

The final area is how we are creative through:

- Open and Accessible Worship
- Active Discipleship
- Engaging in our Community

I found this the most challenging to get my head around, but it includes how we are creative in the way we use our resources like providing an exhibition space, to hosting open studios and wreath making; to engage in our faith in different ways to help us encounter God like 40 bags during Lent, or going to talks at St Paul's Cathedral to offering book talks here. It includes events we participate in locally, to things like our WWI project. It is risking learning new songs in church or open to other ways we might worship.

Can you now take a moment to think of how for you, or for us a congregation you have felt encouraged by how we are creative? Think of a concrete example if you can maybe an event you attended, or something different you tried, or a conversation you had. Can you then write this on your Creative card.

As part of our offering today we will put them in a basket and place them on the altar, and offer them to God. We will celebrate with God all that God is doing in this place, and will continue to do.

Confidence, compassion and creativity are sometimes 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 jubilation⁴! God is not separate from our pain or our joy – but is in the midst of it all.

As we celebrate today, as we give thanks, let us listen not only to our own hearts, but listen too for God's joy. For God sings. God shouts. God rejoices. And is part of this celebration; even in the midst of the unexpected or unplanned. Amen

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=468