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[[1]](#footnote-1); 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 our baptism – 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. Though as I reflected with these people, I was struck that in many ways this has been the case for all of us in the past 2 years. Little is as it was, and maybe it shouldn’t be. But in each of the conversations that I had this week 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 circumstances that impact on us. 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 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 change 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 today is the reading set for this Sunday, rather than the feast of St Anne and continues our journey through Mark, and Jesus evolving ministry. A lot happens in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is rejected in his hometown. He sends the twelve on mission. John the Baptist is killed. Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks on water. In today’s verses, very little seems to happen – though Jesus does heal a few people; but the narrative is much less dramatic today. It is like the disciples and Jesus are looking for some space to rest and reflect on the journey they have been on. The disciples are telling Jesus of their experiences as they have travelled around the region. But their story telling keeps being interrupted. In fact, Mark points out that they don’t seem to even get a chance to eat. The spirit of God is interrupting – in a good way – as the vision of the kingdom of God continues to be revealed. Today’s verses emphasize Jesus’ identity as the true, divine shepherd, who will guide his sheep into the kingdom; and the nature of that kingdom, through healings that disrupt the economy of this world[[2]](#footnote-2).

Zephaniah and Mark have a similar problem; and in fact we face a similar challenge 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 we don’t know how to describe it or respond to it. God interrupting is not a future event; God interrupts, nudges, moves us all the time – but we have to be open to noticing!

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* [[3]](#footnote-3) 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. Or worse, we can see it but it scares us so much we want to run away or deny that it has credence.

Some of God’s interruptions inspire and transform us – but many confront and alarm us. Like many I was ashamed and disappointed at the racism directed at the young English Football players after the Euros Final last Sunday night; but I was equally ashamed that this surprised us – because so many live with this racism every single day. God’s interruption challenges us to a new way of seeing and living; as Mark’s Jesus called those first disciples to see God’s kingdom in new ways.

One of the joys of the Local Heroes exhibit we currently have installed in rotunda downstairs is that it reminds us that while things may not have gone as we have expected there are interruptions of grace, kindness, neighbourliness, and love going on all the time. For me this is evidence of God’s spirit interrupting us, no matter how others might want to label it; but I think it is also a challenge to ask what interruptions we are not seeing.

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. To speak out against injustice and to change our practices if they embody or nurture injustice.

God interrupts! God sings. God shouts. God rejoices. God casts our fear and brings joy - so that we might see all that is possible. God is part of our day of celebration, even in the midst of the unexpected or unplanned just as is was for St Anne, so long ago. Amen.

1. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=2700 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-mark-630-34-53-56-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. St Anne Mission Action Plan 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)