

Zephaniah 3.14-17

He will rejoice over you with gladness

He will renew you in his love;

He will exult over you with loud singing.

Zephaniah 3.17c-e

Father God,

Your promise is that as your word goes forth, it will not return to you without achieving its purpose.

Please speak to us today; give us ears to hear, minds to understand and wills to act,

That you might achieve your purposes in us, and through us,

For your glory's sake. Amen.

When each of my children were born I took a few moments to just be quiet on my own with them;

To hold them in my arms, pray for them, and sing to them.

Simple songs, like, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so..."

In doing this I could express something of my love for them and bless them as they began their journey through life.

I think there is something really powerful in speaking truth and singing love over our children.

I think it actually achieves something; maybe akin to God's promise through the prophet Isaiah that as he sends his word forth into the world it will not return to him before it has achieved the purpose for which he sent it.

There are other occasions when we might sing over others.

A lover might serenade her beloved.

A nation might honour its returning soldiers from battle with songs of victory.

In our bible reading this morning from Zephaniah 3.17 we learn that God sings over his people.

The book of Zephaniah is perhaps not the most well-known book of the bible.

It comes near the end of the Old Testament, the 9th book in a section attributed to the 12 minor prophets, and it runs to a mere 3 chapters.

Zephaniah, we read at the beginning of his book is a 4th generation descendant of King Hezekiah of Judah, so he is of royal lineage, and he prophesied during the reign of another of Hezekiah's descendant's, Josiah; so during the period 640-609BC.

The reign of Josiah was as high point in the history of the southern Jewish kingdom of Judah. You'll recall that after Saul, David and Solomon the nation of Israel divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judah.

Israel fell to Assyrian invaders in the 8th Century BC, but Judah, continued as an independent nation, under the rule of David's descendants for another century.

The relationship between Judah and God was a roller coaster, depending on the inclinations of the king.

Josiah was a king whose dedication to God led to the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem and religious reform to place the worship of God at the centre of the peoples' lives.

Maybe Zephaniah was an influence on his cousin for good; encouraging him in his quest to lead the nation in repentance for their disobedience and failure to love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength.

The thrust of Zephaniah's prophesy is the 'Day of the Lord'.
God is coming!

Therefore, Zephaniah calls not just God's people, but all the nations, to repentance and faith. God will judge those who have rejected him and there will be punishment for those who have not remained faithful to their covenant relationship with God:

"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord." 1.2

"The day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish" 1.15

But Zephaniah also offers hope.

For those who have remained faithful,

And those who have returned to God with all their heart.

God will purify a people for himself and they will find security and enjoy God's provision:

"Then they will find pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid." 3.13

It is in this context that we read Zephaniah 3.17, our passage "to learn and live by", for today:

"The Lord will exult over you with loud singing" (NRSV)

This short sentence is part of a psalm of praise written by Zephaniah (3.14-17), or at least quoted by him.

It's a psalm of joy at God's deliverance for his people on the day he comes in glory.

The Lord has spared his people from judgement, rescued them from their enemies, and offers them protection.

He delights in his people, so much so that he sings over them with joy.

And so Zephaniah calls on the people to respond with praise and thanksgiving.

Now, let me ask you:

When God looks down from heaven at you, what do you suppose he thinks?

In my experience, there are a few people in life who are blessed with boundless self-confidence.

They don't doubt that they are clever, good looking, funny and can achieve pretty much anything they want to.

Sometimes they can!

But far more of us are all too aware that we are seriously flawed human beings. We are wracked by doubt, fear, guilt.

It's not surprising.

If we failed the 11+ we got the message that we weren't clever enough. If we passed it and then didn't get to Oxbridge we weren't clever enough either!

We've constantly been told by the media that if we aren't Brad Pitt we aren't good looking enough.

We've been told by the advertisers that we don't have enough, in their desperate attempt to sell us more.

The girls we asked out laughed in our face at the mere suggestion that they might be seen dead with us...

And if we are honest, the church has not always helped – We have sinned in thought, word and deed; in what we have done or failed to do.

Now, don't get me wrong!

We were all born original sinners by virtue of being descendants of Adam.

We are all under the wrath of God by virtue of that sin.

We are all deserving of eternal punishment in hell.

To tell you anything else would be to lie to you!

But – and this is a really, really, big BUT:

You were made by God in his image.

He loves you enough to have given his own son to die to rescue you.

He offers you free forgiveness, a relationship with him closer than parent to child, and eternal life.

And when you became a Christian, and were incorporated into Christ, God's son, God looked down on you and said "That's my beloved Son. That's my beloved daughter. With you I am well pleased."

And as the angels rejoiced around the throne of God most high, He sang over you with joy, perhaps a little bit like I sang over my children when they were born and I took them in my arms and... just delighted in them.

Now, I hope that this assurance that God rejoices over us with singing might encourage us in many ways.

But let's look at just 3 very quickly. Maybe one of these will have special relevance to you even today.

Firstly, we are known to God.

God can't rejoice over what he does not know!

Sometimes it might feel that life, and God, are passing us by.

Not a bit of it.

Jesus said:

"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

"I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. *Luke 12.6-8*

Secondly, God *delights* in us.

This I think is so important in today's society – a society which relies on putting us down to sell us more, get us to do more, or to conform to its expectations.

We need to feed our minds with what God says about us, not the lies that we are fed by others.

We could pick a myriad of passages from the Scriptures which encourage us with god's love for us, but how about the passage from Isaiah 43 which Peter preached on a couple of week's ago:

For I am the Lord your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;

I give Egypt for your ransom,

Cush and Seba in your stead.

Since you are precious and honoured in my sight,

and because I love you,

Thirdly, God delights in *others*.

One of the most common ways for us to feel better about ourselves is to put others down.

If others look smaller we must look bigger by comparison – right?

Wrong!

When we put others down we just look small ourselves – and it grieves God. The people we are running down are people who God delights in. He doesn't like it when his children squabble and fight.

Instead he tells us to *"encourage one another and build each other up."* *1 Thessalonians 5.11*

Sometimes we talk about people being either activists or contemplatives. Some of us are drawn to action, some to taking a more measured approach to life.

Jesus was undoubtedly an activist – just look at all the things he did in his ministry.

Yet we also read in the bible that he often took time out to go to a quiet place and pray; to just "be" with his Father.

Maybe those of us who are drawn to 'doing something' need to learn from Jesus to take time out to just 'be' with God.

Maybe one of the things we might contemplate in his presence is how he gathers us up in his love as a mother hen gathers up her chicks under her wing; and how he sings over us with joy.

Maybe if we are drawn to a more measured, contemplative life, we can learn from Jesus to get stuck into serving others in the name of Jesus, and sharing the good news of God's love; safe and secure in the knowledge that God knows us, that he delights in us whatever anyone else says and however much we achieve.