

**Third Sunday of Advent, 11th December 2016 - 11.15am Mattins, Chelmsford Cathedral
A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Edward Carter, Canon Theologian**

Zephaniah 3.20a “At that time I will bring you home.”

Words from the end of our Old Testament lesson – words that are part of the hopeful concluding message in the book of the prophet Zephaniah; so, we might say, ‘Advent’ words, and words that speak into our own situation as 2016 draws to a close: ‘at that time I will bring you home.’

If you think about it, those eight simple words encapsulate quite a lot. They have a strong sense of history, with their reference to ‘at that time’. And they also have a strong sense of geography: ‘I will bring you home’. And for the people of Zephaniah’s day the meaning of that history and geography was to do with the way in which God was promising to act, as he helped his chosen people, the descendants of Jacob – the Israelites. The people had been exiled from their land and from Jerusalem. All their history had gone wrong, at the hands of other much more powerful empires, and so their geographical place in the world had been wrecked – they had lost their home. The words of God through the prophet, ‘At that time I will bring you home’, would have been intensely hopeful, at a moment when all seemed lost.

But then for Christians there is always a need to interpret the scriptures in the light of Jesus Christ. Christians believe that Jesus points the world to a bigger sense of history and a bigger sense of geography. History in the light of Christ is a history in which God’s loving purposes are always present, even if they sometimes are difficult to recognize. God’s history is seen in a series of promises: the promise of creation; the promise of faithfulness to his chosen but often disobedient people, seen particularly in the presence of his Holy Spirit; the promise of redemption for all; the promise of resurrection and new creation; the promise that God’s heavenly kingdom will come in all its glory. This is ‘big’ history – the history of the world under God. It’s a history in which the human race has a particular role to play, but it’s a history involving the whole of God’s creation.

And then geography. This ‘big history’ under God is not merely an abstract idea – it’s a real history of creation, and so it involves geography in a deep way. For the Israelites it was about their land – the Promised Land – and about Jerusalem. And then for Christians it is about the world itself, the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, and the heavenly Jerusalem. Christian geography involves sensing and glimpsing and experiencing the presence of God’s kingdom in actual, real places. It rests on a belief in the sacredness of space, which is what is meant by believing in a creator God, and a God who will make his creation new in Christ.

Our own national political life down the years has also been much involved with history and geography. If you look at the debates that Parliament has engaged in over many centuries, one has a strong sense of the continuing attempt to work out our country’s place in the world – its history and its geography. And 2016 has thrown up significant events, which seem to be echoed in other parts of the world too. The so-called ‘Brexit’ referendum revealed a national community uncertain about its place in the world, and this has been a prominent theme in the presidential election in the USA.

It is certainly not my place as a preacher to pontificate about which way that referendum should have gone – different people have different and deeply held convictions. But it is interesting that these questions of history and geography have been very important in that

debate. Even more interesting is the observation that over the past two generations, politics has come to be dominated more and more by economics, and economics has been dominated by a particular approach, sometimes called the neo-classical school of economics. In short, we have been told that economics is nothing more than the quest to maximize utility on a global scale. And while such an approach to economics can often seem to provide a powerful explanatory tool, it is undoubtedly true that it has no proper, deep sense of history, and it has no proper, deep sense of geography.

History involves adventurous steps and the forging of a story, while neo-classical economics merely seeks a reversion to some kind of 'optimal' point. Geography attaches deep and enduring meaning to places, while neo-classical economics is strangely place-less, which is why global businesses have arisen, and why they move their activities around the world simply to seek out a marginal cost benefit. The old traditions of steel from Sheffield, or electronic engineering in Chelmsford are swept away as worthless. But I believe the Christian faith tells us that history and geography are not worthless. To put it another way, I believe the Christian faith points us to a *better* vision of economics.

One interpretation of the Brexit vote is that it represents a reaction against the placeless version of economics – the economics that has no sense of history either. Of course, Brexit has meant different things to different people – and some of those things seem very fearful, which is a matter of sadness and regret. But many would feel that there *is* a need to challenge the modern economic hegemony, with its complete lack of any proper sense of history and geography. If Brexit is part of that then, at the very least, we might better understand where it has come from, and be better placed to contribute to the direction it is taking us in. There is a growing sense in which we need a better vision for economics, and Christians are increasingly contributing their voices to articulating that vision. I believe our politicians and our business leaders are yearning for that vision to become mainstream.

The prophetic voice of the Church is needed more than ever, and in fact is more and more welcome in our public and communal life. We shouldn't really be surprised about this, because our nation and our world today needs to hear the message of the prophet Zephaniah just as much as the Israelites did: a promise from God that, 'at that time I will bring you home.' We need to map our sense of history and our sense of geography onto the history and geography which is revealed in God's promises of old, and which is revealed above all else in Jesus Christ. He, it is, who shapes all of history. He, it is, who gives true and deep meaning to geography by giving us the gospel message, that the kingdom of heaven is near.

May we be bold enough to live our lives as Christians and as a Church in such a way that the Christ Jesus who shapes all time and space is taken seriously by our political leaders and by our business and economic leaders. May we be ready to encourage them, pray for them, challenge them, and share with them in their important and high calling. And may we hear again, as a living and urgent and hopeful message, the words of the prophet from God: 'at that time I will bring you home.' Amen.