Proper 28, Ordinary 33A
The Lord does good; The Lord does harm?
Zephaniah 1.7,12-18 | Matthew 25.14-30

"Be silent," says the prophet. Pay attention. The Day of the Lord is at hand, and God's own people are on the chopping block. Terror is coming, and blood and dust. Everything is going to unravel. Wealth will be no protection on that Day of darkness, ruin and anguish. A passion of destruction is going to lay waste to the earth.

An image comes to mind of a character in a movie – a desperate activist chaining themselves to a tree, or vandalising a fossil fuel plant, or protesting an arms conference. This is someone who sees something awful coming and can't believe that others can't or won't see it too. It seems the whole of the rest of their society is just sailing along like normal, refusing to take in the danger, refusing to change anything to avert the coming crisis.

This person would be the hero of the movie, taking on the powers that be, waking everyone up in time to move the levers that will save the planet. And yet, in reality, most of us aren't that hero. Most of us don't even want to listen to them. We turn away and call them crazy; we try to shut them down. Even when they're shouting to us from our holy scriptures, we want to turn the page.

I'm really struck by this verse in Zephaniah's prophecy: "I will punish the people who settle like dregs in wine, those who say in their hearts, "*The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm*."" What an indictment. Punishment is coming on the dregs in the wine, the thickened sediment at the bottom of the bottle that make it unfit to drink. We usually think of the "dregs of society" as the "losers" at bottom of the heap, those outsiders who have failed to succeed. But Zephaniah says the real dregs are those self-satisfied people who have convinced themselves that God is toothless, powerless, absent, impotent. They might give lip service to God, but their God makes nothing and destroys nothing. Their God causes nothing and ends nothing.

Is this not a description of our western culture now? We don't recognise that our lives and all the goods of creation are God's gift and blessing. And we have no concept that what we do with our lives will be weighed in the balance and we might not like the outcome. Most people live without any sense that we will be judged for what we do and don't do. And not just in the secular world – this complacency about God's judgement infects a church that believes that God is just "too nice" to execute justice.

But why would we accept this "nice" God of our imaginations? Do we not believe that God is just?
What about the scammer who ruins lives by conning people out of their life savings and gets away with it? Or the sexual predator who is never found out? Do they deserve consequences?
What about the billionaire who hoards wealth on the back of exploiting cheap child labour – they have had their reward…will they also have their punishment? Or the political leader who gloats over the deaths of tens of thousands of women and children and the misery of millions more?

Are the lives of the poor and the victimised so cheap that we don't think they are worth an advocate and a judge to bring a reckoning against those who caused their suffering?

Or perhaps we think that judgement is necessary for these bad kinds of people, but *we* don't need to pay attention to the words of the prophet, because we are decent, ordinary churchgoing folk.

The prophets of our scriptures declare God's judgement not only on corrupt individuals, but on whole cities, even nations. Because we don't just experience the consequences of our personal choices. We also experience the consequences of the actions done on our behalf – the weaving together and upholding of systems that privilege some at the expense of others.

We're all completely enmeshed in a society where we either suffer from the choices of those in power, or we benefit from economic and political choices that knowingly cause collateral harm to the most vulnerable and voiceless. And if we are those who benefit now, we can expect to be caught up in the consequences that come for those who close their eyes to injustice.

But what about Jesus? Didn't he come to let us all off the hook, and show us that God is not a God of judgement, but of mercy?

Enter Matthew's Gospel, which at this point in the year has Jesus telling several very uncomfortable stories describing the end of things: the king dividing the sheep and the goats, the parable of the wedding feast, the delayed bridegroom, and today's story of the absentee land-owner and the talents.

Now we have to be careful here, because centuries of scaremongering about hell and damnation get in the way of our ability to read these stories as the original hearers might have done. We don't know exactly what Jesus means when he ends parables with characters being cast out into darkness, with "weeping and gnashing of teeth." But it is very clear that in Jesus' picture of the end of the age, there is a kind of sifting and weighing up, and that some of God's people will be found wanting.

In these parables, Jesus warns his followers against living with a mindset of fear, selfishness, lack of trust, lack of preparedness and lack of love. At the very least, these things can carry their own consequences of unhappiness and bitterness in this life. But maybe Jesus is also warning us that there will be a further reckoning too, especially for those who refused the call to a risky discipleship in the service of the least.

But we shouldn't let the thought of judgement lead us into anxiety, or keeping score of rights and wrongs. The good news is that God in Christ continually takes the initiative to keep recalling us to the right path, and gives us the Spirit to empower the kind of courageous love that Jesus embodied.

Every few years in Advent, we hear a different reading from Zephaniah: "Do not fear, O Zion, The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." Zephaniah doesn't shrink away from the reality of judgement, from the terrible Day of the Lord's passion. But also says God will form, even in the midst of a corrupt and deceitful city, a small remnant of humble ones who speak the truth. God's power is at work to gather and transform a people after God's own heart who, like yeast, will bring healing to the nations. And over these ones, God is rejoicing.

Through the victory of Christ's cross, God has made a way for humanity that redeems all our failure, and calls us into joy, despite the consequences we may deserve, despite the self-destruction that we may suffer due to our or others' selfish greed. It is true that in God's mercy there is nothing, ultimately for us to fear. But there is still a reckoning. We will have to answer for how we have lived in the light of Christ.

Let's not bury our talent, or our heads, in the ground. Each day we are asked to step up into the challenging way of love, resisting evil and giving ourselves to the good we discern is being asked of us. And we do this trusting in a God who is living and active, the Risen One who will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and whose kingdom will have no end.

The Rev'd Brenda Rockell, 15 November 2026