**Reflections – 15 - 22 December 2024**

**Bible study on Zephaniah 3:14-20**

**Begin with an opening prayer**

Lord, we trust you,
you are our strength and salvation.
We trust in you and come to you for refreshing.
We will shout aloud, sing for joy
and tell everyone how great you are.
**Amen.**

**Read the passage**

*Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.*

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

 **14**Sing, Daughter Zion;
    shout aloud, Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
    Daughter Jerusalem!
**15**The Lord has taken away your punishment,
    he has turned back your enemy.
The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you;
    never again will you fear any harm.
**16**On that day
    they will say to Jerusalem,
“Do not fear, Zion;
    do not let your hands hang limp.
**17**The Lord your God is with you,
    the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
    in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
    but will rejoice over you with singing.”

**18**“I will remove from you
    all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals,
    which is a burden and reproach for you.
**19**At that time I will deal
    with all who oppressed you.
I will rescue the lame;
    I will gather the exiles.
I will give them praise and honor
    in every land where they have suffered shame.
**20**At that time I will gather you;
    at that time I will bring you home.
I will give you honor and praise
    among all the peoples of the earth
when I restore your fortunes[[e](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Zephaniah%203&version=NIV#fen-NIV-22841e)]
    before your very eyes,”
says the Lord.

**Explore and respond to the text**

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

**Bible notes
Zephaniah 3:14-20**

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of the reforming King Josiah (Zephaniah 1:1; 640-609 BC). He is known for his striking images of ‘the day of the Lord’ (e.g. 1:14-18), which brings God’s judgement on Jerusalem’s enemies and salvation for his humble people. Some of these images are particularly disturbing whenever there is war in the Middle East, and God is seen as ‘the king of Israel’ (v.15) in the midst of Jerusalem, ‘a warrior who gives victory’ (v.17). So, we must take great care how we interpret this short book. These closing verses call for rejoicing because God’s people are no longer living under the divine judgement that had them deported from their ancestral land to Babylon. During this exile, they would have been aware of the oppressive presence of a foreign king dominating their daily existence. But now it is not their enemies but ‘the king of Israel, the Lord [who] is in your midst’ (v.15). In their world, the most powerful are those with the biggest armies and the most effective fighters. So, it is not surprising that Zephaniah pictures the Lord as he does. But he modifies his image: ‘he will renew you in his love’ (v.17). His people’s 60-year exile was ended by the Persian king Cyrus seizing power in Babylon in 539 BC. He then allowed exiled nations to return home. Isaiah 44:24ff (which most scholars date towards the end of the exile) sees Cyrus as the Lord’s anointed. The return home is the reason for the gladness seen at festival times (vv.17-18). Joy renews confidence, removes fear and shame, and holds out the prospect of national renewal. This is good news, especially for those who feel particularly excluded, such as the lame and the outcast, who can now believe that they too have a future.

**Reflection**

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

In the past few years, we have seen images of statues being torn down, causing us to re- examine our thinking on the slave trade. There are ongoing discussions about whether organisations and families who have inherited wealth made through the slave trade should make reparation today. Some reparation or acknowledgement might help bring closure and relief to the descendants of those wronged in the past, and maybe a little joy to the givers. If we read the passage from Zephaniah 3 from the point of view of people who are downtrodden or oppressed, we can see how it might resonate particularly with them. What might a restoration of fortunes look like for them?

**Questions for reflection**

*You may wish to use the picture to help you think about or discuss issues arising from this week’s Bible passage.*

* What does it mean to be at home with God?
* How does this impact our everyday lives?
* How do we create a sense of coming home for people who enter our church?

**A prayer to end the Bible study**

Lord, may we go forward in hope, love and joy.
May our lives bring joy to you and to those around us.
Help us to change when we need to
and give us joy in repenting.
**Amen.**