One of the effects of a deepening darkness – whether that darkness is the decline of the year in the far latitudes of the earth’s hemispheres or the more subtle dark moods that can take hold of us – one of the effects, is a turning in upon ourselves. We are forced to reflect and even confront a number of those conjured insecurities and threats, some real, many imagined, that have misshapen our perception of things. Especially, the perception of ourselves. Unlike Lent (that looks towards spring, in the northern hemisphere, and Easter, liturgically) Advent is the time of self-reflection in intensifying darkness; a darkness broken not with the splendours of the resurrection, but with the candle in the cradle – a vulnerable and dependent baby. Who is God, but not obviously so. Deliverance from the darkness is fragile; the fragility of a hope that St. Paul tells us is beyond hope.

What creeps out of you in the shadows? In the inwardness that dark nights (some of them of the soul) bring, what creeps out? I ask this because these are the very things that the birth of that candle in the cradle will throw, quite literally, into relief. And one such tenebrae, haunting so many human beings, is shame. In the past, I have asked in a sermon such as this one, “Of what are you afraid?” But this morning I am asking “Of what are you ashamed?” What shames you? Because shame misshapes. It distorts. And spiritual formation is all about coming to terms with distortions so that true growth and better formation may take place – which is nothing more, and nothing less, than salvation. In our reading from the minor prophet Zephaniah, this morning, we heard that when the Messiah comes God will “deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles or refugees. I will give them praise and honour in every land where they have suffered shame.”

There’s a famous novel by a Nineteenth Century French author, Gustave Flaubert, entitled Madame Bovary. It’s the story of a married woman badly used by a socially
elevated man; a woman who is open to being used because she is ashamed of her lowly marriage to a country doctor who has no social ambition. She is seduced, cast off and, eventually, commits suicide. But it is not Emma’s story that I want to draw attention to, but the story of that country doctor, Charles Bovary. As the lead character in the novel, strange but aptly, Emma enters late into the narrative. The book opens with Charles. He’s an awkward, large limbed chap who arrives at a new school wearing the wrong cap. Children can sometimes be very cruel to other children in a class and Charles’ name doesn’t help him: Bovary easily reminds his French classmates of bouvier – cowhand; someone ankle deep in dung and stupid, bovine. The novel opens with the public humiliation of Charles at the hands of an insecure teacher who sides with his young pupils in humiliating the new boy in a very public manner. The teacher treats him sarcastically while the pupils jeer and egg him on. Charles is publicly humiliated, and this shaming affects him for the rest of his rather sad, and utterly uninspiring life – as the novel narrates.

I hope such acts don’t happen in schools today and that there is more awareness of who to go to for support if any such harassment does occur. But it certainly happened in my day at school. Shame is a complex emotion effecting both psychological development and wellbeing, and accompanied by a whole series of physiological expressions. If there is any physiological basis for the shame – like the lameness the prophet speaks of – it amplifies the magnitude of that physiological disability. In fact, it makes it a disability. And we all have levels of dis-ability. If there is any sociological basis for the shame – being homeless, being a refugee, being an exile (all again referred to by the prophet) – it amplifies the magnitude of not-belonging, of being not just an outsider, but a social cast-off. In many mediaeval paintings depicting Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden, the figures are shown with their heads hung down or their hands covering their faces. But I am not, by referring of these pictorial works relating sin to shame. The crippled and the exiled that Zephaniah tells us will be restored, healed, brought to rest, made whole and secure are not at all necessarily the sinful. They seemed to be the ones most sinned against – in the way poor Charles Bovary is sinned against (most particularly by a man who should have been looking after his well-being). The point is: feeling ashamed, being shamed, has profound consequences, emotionally, physically and psychologically. The soul is disfigured.

However flickering and fragile is the birth of Christ at Christmas, Zephaniah understood: this is the hope that the whole of Judah and Israel awaited – the hope of restoration and
wholeness. It is in the shadows created by that light that some of our uglier disfigurations (disfigurations that have impacted upon our souls) can appear. And they have to appear so we can see them as the things that have disfigured us; warped our lives; warped our perceptions of life, our situations, ourselves. They have hindered us from seeing not just the beauty, the splendour, and the wonder of Christ, but the beauty, the splendour and the wonder that we are – as God created us. They have inhibited the flow of true life for which we were made. Our bodies, souls and situations need healing. Our shames cry out for their redemption. The hurt of our humiliations can get passed on through us to those around us. They can eat away at us and, in turn, eat away at our relation to each other and our world. When Charles Bovary dies an autopsy is carried out by two of his colleagues. They opened him up and, as Flaubert narrates it, they found “nothing.” Nothing is figurative. The humiliations that had accumulated over Charles life, that began at school and only accumulated, ate away over the years at everything he was; ate away all the potential for beauty, splendour and wonder that might have manifested itself in the kind of man he might have become. Shame is that powerful.

Zephaniah has a different ending and a different story to tell, which the candle of Christmas brings into sharp relief: “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…. At that time, I will enfold you in my arms; at that time, I will bring you home. I will give you honour and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes.” Thanks be to God: humiliation is turned into humility; the healed become the healers; the disfigured soul has been refashioned. It is now a star, a jewel, a hoard of treasure.