

# The Prophets-Joel

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Sermon Topic: Refreshing follows Repentance

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> August 2018**

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Readings: Psalm 50, Joel 2:12-17, Joel 2:18-27, Acts 3:17-23

When everything is going right we kind of ride the wave. It's a very natural thing to do. But the longer things seem to go right and easy the easier it is for us to get complacent. This has been no more clearly demonstrated than in the various countries around the world where natural disasters have happened. Where no adverse events have happened for a long time, people take for granted that the same would continue, look at Christchurch for example. Once something has happened that awakens our consciousness the smart wake up and do something about it; the truly wise already had. In our daily lives and our spiritual lives we can do the same: become content and happy with the status-quo and hence get slack. What's worse, we can become unable to see our own shortcomings, our failures and weaknesses. We fail to see what God wants us to be doing. Instead we come to believe the current good situation is ongoing approval of our current way of life. Becoming a lukewarm Christian is not a good thing. Now let's not go down the track of thinking that we are supposed to go around miserable all the time – that's far from the truth! The Lord wants us to rejoice in our lives with Him, to share in His ministry with its joys and challenges to be overcome.

This morning we come to the prophet Joel. Another small Old Testament book, just three chapters, Joel has proven to be one of the most fascinating in accurately speaking of critical things in our Christian walk. But first the setting, the big picture.

The exact date of Joel's ministry is debated but likely occurred in the beginning of the reign of King Joash of Judah (836-797 B.C.) long before the exile. Joash was crowned as a child and was enthusiastic for the things of the Lord as a young man and started work on the Temple. Joel makes no mention of the Assyrians and Babylonians who would have such a negative impact on the nation later, but he does mention the Egyptians. This would mean that Joel is the oldest prophet to leave a book of prophecies with his ministry overlapping that of Jeremiah.

The book begins with a plague. A plague of locusts. Now we are not too familiar with plagues in New Zealand although some parts of the country suffer from plagues of mice and rats occasionally. Many parts of the world have plagues as part of the regular cycle of the natural order. Locusts can stay up to some seventeen years in the ground before they decide to swarm in dry seasons. We know only too well the story of the Exodus and how God used these natural occurrences in a very unnatural way to make a point. The thing about plagues is that they completely destroy the normal pattern of daily life. Locusts eat anything and everything. For a society completely reliant on the crops this is a disaster if the crops are still in the field or the locusts can get into the silos where the food is stored. The crops that would feed a community for a year or more can disappear in days. Not only that they can drive animals and people crazy with their noise and getting into ears, noses and on the skin. Houses and sheds built with natural rooves of leaves or brush will

likewise be destroyed. God can use the natural get to our attention in unnatural ways. Can you think of a time God has used the natural order to shock you out of complacency? I think there is a lot of that going on at the moment. The lowest to the highest in society were affected. Joel tells the drunkards to weep. The wine is gone because the vines have been eaten (1:5). So too "the cereal offering and drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests mourn, the ministers of the Lord" (1:9) So what was God saying to the people?

Clearly, in their prosperity the people had wandered from the Lord. Joel presents the Lord's calls for repentance; a challenge to the people to return their focus to serving and honouring Him. **"Yet even now,' says the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.' Return to the Lord your God . . . Who knows whether he will not turn and repent and leave a blessing behind him?"** (2:12–14). Unlike so many other times in history, this time, like the people of Ninevah did in Jonah's day, the people respond to Joel's preaching and repented. They recognised that they had wandered and came back to the Lord with a passion. This resulted in God's loving jealousy for his people is stirred up with God sending grain, wine and oil so that the people would be refreshed and so that they would not be a reproach among the nations" (2:19). What was it they had done? How had their failure been evidenced? It appears that the people in their prosperity had slowly begun to slow, even stop, their work on the Temple in Jerusalem. In their prosperity they had focussed on their own homes and businesses and gave less and less time to the things of God. They had begun to see God's blessing as instead the profit of their own work and labours not recognising that work with integrity is always required of us but that the long-term outcome and reward is in God's hands. In putting themselves first they failed to honour God and God was not amused. Fortunately, they responded to God's Word and warning, repenting, turning from their sin of putting self first and turned to putting God first and continuing His work. The region would see a sustained period of peace and prosperity and the Temple was built.

This gives rise however to one of the most startling prophetic statements of the Old Testament. The events in Judah are in some ways an archetype of what will happen in times to come. God declares to the people: **"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and the maidservants in those days I will pour out my spirit. And I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered."**

This message points to two significant days to come. The first has been fulfilled, as was recognised by the apostle Peter, on the day of Pentecost. The Lord has now poured out His Spirit on all flesh. Until Pentecost on a few were recipients of God's Spirit – prophets, priests and kings. The ordinary worshipper did not receive the

Spirit. At Pentecost and since God has been pouring out His Spirit on those who respond to His Word and walk in the way of Jesus. Now sons and daughters do prophesy. Old men dream dreams and the young see visions. From the poorest and lowest to the richest and greatest God's Spirit speaks. This was a dramatic change from the past and continues today. Joel says here that God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh. It is God's intent to make Himself known to people at a depth never before experienced. You can learn all about driving a car. You can even become an expert at car racing games but there is nothing that compares to getting behind the wheel and driving out on the street yourself. Likewise, there is a world of difference between experiencing God at a distance and being immersed in His Holy presence. The picture of a worldwide outpouring upon God's people compels us to think of being soaked and saturated and swept along by the Spirit of God. Joel wanted his readers to anticipate an unmistakable flood-tide of God's presence. For those who turn to God times of great refreshing are promised.

The striking contrast is second day that is to come, this is of a very different order. Joel's "day of the Lord", the day the locusts had eaten, as it were, was a very small foreshadowing a much darker, serious "Day of the Lord" that is to come. This will be no local event as it was in Joel's day. This Day will be heralded by signs that all will see. The imagery of the skies being shrouded in columns of fire and smoke and the sun being hidden and the moon being of a blood colour suggests a time of great fires of a scale unknown before where the sun and moon are all but blocked out. Other "portents" in the heavens are undefined, they could refer to volcanic, tornado or lightening activity. Generally, as in Joel's time, we should look for a disruption of the physical order rather than some spiritual handwriting in the skies. I must say that sitting writing this and seeing the news across the world from Australia to Europe, to California and Hawaii and seeing the red skies, the columns of smoke and all the rest one has pause to wonder. No, we do not know the day or hour of the Lord's coming but we are told to be aware of the season. Is this when the Ring of Fire awakens? All of these things are signs says Joel, they are portents, clear indicators and when they occur we are to recognise that the Day of the Lord's judgement is not far off. It gives one pause to wonder.

God also gives us those wonderful words, **""Whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32)**. John Calvin, the Reformer, had as a key plank of his theology that the saints should be assured of their salvation. In essence, as we know and walk faithfully with the Lord we should be assured that whatever happens in this world God has our back. These things are to happen at some time in history. While many may be willingly or ignorantly blind to the fact the Lord is always faithful to His Word. Just as we watch the prophecies of the Scriptures unfold in human history so too we can be confident that as we walk in humility with God, as we constantly respond to His Word, as we check ourselves, repent and constantly realign our lives with His purposes, we can be confident of our salvation. All who call on the Name of the Lord, all who love the Lord and serve Him will be saved. The times the locusts have eaten, the loss and pain we have suffered or have to suffer from time to time, will be made up to us as the Lord works out His salvation.

As ever then, be aware of what is happening in the world. Reflect on what God has done and said in the past and if there are areas of your life that need work, if there are things that you have done or said or thought that are unworthy of the Lord, make time to repent of them. Confess to them to someone if that is appropriate and ask the Lord for forgiveness. Because as Joel and the people of his time demonstrate, times of great refreshing follow repentance.

Amen!

