

“THE MESSAGE OF JOEL”

Joel 1:1-12; 2:12-17

We all have our favourite parts of the Bible, I'm sure. There are passages to which we turn often because they help us in particular ways, because they are fairly easy to understand or because they are associated with significant times in our lives. Conversely, there are parts of the Bible into which we rarely poke our noses unless they happen to be part of a daily reading plan or we have to read them for some course or other – *Deuteronomy*, *Numbers*, most of John's *Revelation*, for example. For many Christians, the Minor Prophets are probably unfamiliar territory: there's a lot of stuff about judgement, many references to names and events that are a complete mystery to us, not much story usually and little apparent relevance to our day to day Christian lives.

But St Paul tells his young protégé Timothy that “*all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*” (2 Timothy 3:16), so we should beware of ignoring or avoiding parts of the Bible that initially seem to us to be less attractive than others. Over the next few weeks, then, we're going to take a look at the so-called Minor Prophets – those little books at the end of the Old Testament that you can never find without looking at the index – and see what they might have to say to us today.

We'll look at what seems to be the main theme of each one – or, at last, one of the major themes – and, I hope, grasp something of the message that God has for us today. The men of God who first spoke or wrote down these messages, often (but not always) wandering preachers who lived on the margins of society, came to the people of God with messages that burned with urgency and spoke directly and uncompromisingly into their situations. Judgment is often a key theme, but it is perhaps the reason for that judgement that is most important for us to grasp today.

That's because the sins and injustices which were a part of the experience of the people of 700BC are still very much part of our world today. There have been occasions in the past when I've preached from some of these Minor Prophets and I've been taken to task for upsetting people's political sensibilities, but I make no apology for that. God's word speaks with as much power and as much truth into the situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it did to those who were living according to the same attitudes 2,600 years ago, 1,000 years ago or fifty years ago.

We're not going to follow the order that the books appear in the Old Testament – mainly because when we sat down to sort out who was preaching over the next few months we decided to choose our own – but they weren't written in the order that we have them today anyway. And it's not the order in which they fit into the history of Israel and Judah, but if you are interested you can read through *1 & 2 Kings* and try to fit them into the history of Israel. Unless it's vital to understanding the message of the prophet, though, we won't go into a lot of historical background. Sometimes that can be very interesting, but it can easily become an excuse for avoiding the real issues that confront us.

And I'm not going to deal with the subject of what prophecy is in any great depth. Just briefly, though, I will say this. These prophets were men who were set apart by God to bring his message to his people. They spoke at times when there were particular occasions of disobedience and rebellion against God and they confronted those sins head on. The warnings that were given referred to events that were to happen in the near future, but they also had a long term application. A word of caution, though. We must beware of reading into the prophecies specific things such as the setting up of the European Union or the takeover of world government by New Age conspiracies, as some people are wont to do. I remember as a kid hearing sermons about the way in which the Soviet Union was going to take over the world and, more recently, that the twelve states of the European Union were the empire of the Antichrist. I'm not too sure what they mean now that the Soviet Union is no more and there are considerably more than twelve states in the EU. On the other hand, we cannot dismiss the messages of the prophets as irrelevant – they still speak to us with power and urgency.

So to the little book of *Joel*. Just come with me for a moment in your imagination to the top of Eastern Avenue, up near The Friary School. You're looking out over the Trent Valley towards Burton on a day in early summer. It's a beautiful view – even with the warehouses of Fradley Park in the middle distance. The trees are starting to grow heavy under their new leaves, the hedgerows are full of blossom and greenery, the fields are alternately green with grass and young cereals and yellow with the last of the oilseed rape. And as you stand there on a warm, sunny afternoon, away on the horizon, beyond the A38, beyond the trees and chimneys, a distant bank of mist appears and rises towards you. As the rays of the sun catch it, it seems like an approaching snowstorm, about two or three miles across, and apparently being blown towards Lichfield.

But as it comes closer you are aware that it is not silent, as mist or snow should be – it's crackling like a vast fire, whirring like a great display of helicopters, rustling deafeningly like the wind in an autumn forest. Then the cloud passes over you, so thick that the light of the sun is completely blocked and it is as dark as night, so noisy that you cannot even hear yourself breathing. After several minutes of terror, it has passed. It must have been two or three miles long and a couple of miles across. And when you look up again, the green, yellow and white countryside is brown – the fields full of stubble, the hedgerows and trees bare and stunted, like those pictures of the Somme after the land battles of the First World War. The cloud was a swarm of locusts, dreadful in its appearance, awesome in its size, incredible in its destructive power. And that was a relatively small swarm! An average swarm can devour up to 900 square miles of vegetation in a single day. Locusts were a constant threat to the people of Joel's day. The Hebrew language has ten different words for locust – of which four are used in this passage in *Joel 1:4* (and the translators have struggled to render it in English – “*other locusts*”) – and their appearance would mean utter devastation.

Joel was preaching to his listeners in the wake of a particularly severe plague of locusts. It was something that had never happened on such a scale before – the passage we've just read gives some idea of its effect (*1:2-7*). This is not an allegorical description but a real, life-like report of what has happened and Joel exclaims in *1:12*, “*Surely the joy of mankind has withered away.*” It is an act of God and he wants his people to learn through it. The basic economy of the land has been ruined and all sections of society have been deeply affected. Joel uses this situation to remind the people that their lives have fallen far short of what God expects of them. God has blessed them abundantly, but they are taking the blessings for granted. Their faith has degenerated into an empty formalism and their lies into moral decadence – a message that we shall hear repeated by other prophets, so be prepared!

Again and again we find God using such occasions to remind men and women of his power, to bring his wayward people back to himself. The plagues themselves are not his full judgement, but an indication of how great his power is and a way of making people think carefully about their response to God. They point forward to a time when real and final judgement will come – that's the eschatological dimension to these prophecies – but they always fall short of complete annihilation, so that men and women have an opportunity to mend their ways and return to God. In past centuries the world has had to face the Black Death, terrible acts of destruction, the great influenza epidemic early in the last century, various so-called “natural disasters”, the spread of Aids across the globe and now the spectre of global warming looms. Most of those are not as swift as a plague of locusts, nor as localised – nor, indeed, violent. But nevertheless we are often confronted with things that are referred to as plagues and which come with destructive and terrifying power. How does Joel's message help us to understand all this today, then?

1. PLAGUES ARE REMINDERS OF GOD'S JUDGEMENT

Firstly, let's say something about plagues in general, and we'll use the example of Aids, as it is still a very current concern in many parts of the world. When God allows this to happen he is not doing it just to punish the evil ones: it's not a question of simple “cause and effect”. It's vitally important to remember that when Aids is often referred to as “the Gay Disease” or “The African Disease”, implying that they are the only people affected. We need to remember – as Paul reminds us in *Romans 3:23* – that

we are all sinners in God's sight and the Bible makes it abundantly clear that pride, gossip, selfishness and so on are equally as repugnant to him as sexual promiscuity. We can never, ever say "It serves them right", because it would serve you right too. Nothing whatever is to be gained by finger pointing.

The plagues of locusts was quite indiscriminate in its eating habits. It didn't swerve around little plots of land farmed by the righteous. The Black Death killed many very devout men and women, including whole monasteries. Aids doesn't affect only gay men or the sexually promiscuous. Global warming, swine flu – whatever the plague, it serves as a reminder to all men and women of the judgement of God. Even if they aren't all the kind of people who believe in God, it does at least make people sit up and take notice. As one commentator puts it: "*God's summons to judgement is, in the Bible, not normally a pronouncement of irrevocable doom, but an opportunity for repentance.*" Which leads us on to our next point.

2. THERE IS A NEED FOR A REAL RESPONSE BEFORE GOD

The people of Israel would have shown their grief by ripping their clothes. It was an outward sign that something was happening. But Joel is concerned that their repentance, their change of agenda, will go no deeper than their vests. So he says, "Don't be superficial in your response. This goes to the very heart of your being, so let the work begin there." If you read through these books of the prophets at the end of the Old Testament, you will find again and again the prophets referring to the outward response of the people, with the observation that it doesn't seem to change anything on the inside. Amos, for example, goes on about how the people celebrated all the religious festivals and kept the Sabbath, but couldn't wait for it to be over so that they could get back to cheating their customers and fleecing the poor. Isaiah rails against the fasting of God's people which does nothing to alleviate the plight of those whom they are oppressing and exploiting. That real response needs to be made by us as individuals, as a church, as a nation. (For the people of Joel's day, that was all one and the same thing, of course.) In 2:12 Joel talks of coming to God "*with all your heart*", ensuring that it isn't just an outward show

Of course, we can make superficial responses to the gospel. We can stick the fish badges on our cars without observing the laws on the road. We can nail up the embroidered texts in our lavish homes without questioning why we need such palatial accommodation. We can say the prayers and sing the songs at church, while our mind is scheming about ways to boost our chances of promotion at work. We can make our offerings to God each week while we do all that we can to ensure that we pay as little tax as possible for the benefit of others. But it's not the outward appearance that matters – it's the change of heart, the renewed attitude, the agenda that is in line with the agenda of the Kingdom of God.

It's always been very fashionable, for good old evangelicals particularly, to get involved in "*rending their garments*", in taking action by writing to their MP or to the press, petitioning various bodies in fulsome condemnation of all kinds of sinful practices and, effectively, suggesting to people that if they have a problem that it's the fault of their own sinful actions. But how can you do that if you know that there is still pride, selfishness, disobedience in your own life that needs dealing with? The outward show of upright religiosity is useless without some kind of inner change. That was exactly the sin of the people to whom Joel first spoke. They had all the externals, but it made no difference to their hearts and minds.

What is needed is a change of heart, an attitude of repentance, an acknowledgment that we need God's help in giving up sinful patterns of behaviour and sinful attitudes. And when that happens, God will honour it. Look at the rest of 2:13,14 – God is described as "*gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love*". That's the God to whom we are responding. He may, as it were, crack the whip, but he will also relent. We can speak out against the evils in our world, in our society, but we need to ensure that we are not condemning, and that we are not, ourselves, continuing in sin that we know needs to be dealt with. Above all, though, we can pray.

3. THERE IS AN URGENT CALL TO INTERCEDE

In all of this we must recognise the need to pray of behalf of our nation and our world. The priests of Joel's day were called upon to lift up prayers to God on behalf of the rest of the population (2:17). They were told to weep, to approach God with real feeling, a genuine concern. As people set free in Christ, we realise that we are now the new priesthood – a royal priesthood according to *1 Peter 2:9* – and that call comes to us with renewed power today. Do you have a real concern when you pray on behalf of this city, this nation? Of course, we don't pray in the self-righteous manner of the Pharisee whom Jesus described in *Luke 8:11,12*, with arrogant pomposity, but with a real desire to see God at work in his world.

Joel's hearers were called to pray for two things – for God's grace to be shown in sparing the people: and for God's glory to be shown to those who disbelieved. We must pray that God will indeed show his grace by turning the hearts of men and women towards him. And we are to pray this so that God's power and glory will be demonstrated in his response, so that people will not be able to say "*Where is your God in all this, then?*" (2:17d).

And don't forget that this is an urgent call. The situation really needed prompt action for the people of Joel's day. There was no point hanging around to see if things would get better on their own. God tells his people through Joel that everyone is to be brought together – even the woman who has just given birth, even the couple on their honeymoon. The situation is desperate, he says, so let's get going. And that is still very much the case. We need to pray. We cannot wait around for special conferences, for books to be written, for petitions to be organised – even for the new prayer room to be opened. The immediate call is to repentance and intercessory prayer.

And notice that everyone is to be involved in praying for God's grace and mercy to be shown – old and young, priests and laity, families and newly-weds. This isn't something that is to come only from those who are directly affected (although in Joel's day everyone was touched in some way by the effects of the locusts and we might argue that we are all touched by the effects of, for example, global warming) – but it is to come from all who really take seriously the responsibility of being God's people. We all have a part to play in repenting of our own sin, in repenting on behalf of our nation and in pleading before God for his mercy and grace to be shown to all. When the prayer room is open, at the beginning of next month, make use of it, but also pray in your homes and in the other meetings and groups of which you are a part: our nation needs the prayers of God's faithful people.

God restored the fortunes of his people – as we read in 2:25,26 – but that doesn't mean that he never challenged his people again, nor does it mean that his final judgement on all men and women has been averted. Let us never forget that all of us will one day stand before God – and let us be prepared for that as we daily come before him in prayer and repentance.

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Another anonymous prophet, bringing God's word to the people of his own day and to people down through the centuries. There are about a dozen people named Joel who appear in the Old Testament – this prophet is not one of them. All we know is that he was the son of Pethuel (also unknown) and, judging from his concern with Judah and Jerusalem, he lived and preached in Judah. There are no datable historic events mentioned in the book, so it is very difficult to pin down when Joel was preaching, but many scholars believe it was written in the ninth century BC – although some date it as late as the sixth century (after the exile). It doesn't really make any difference to the message. There are many similarities in terms of style and vocabulary with the prophecies of Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah and Jeremiah, but no-one is sure who was influenced by whom.

Joel is preaching in the wake of a severe drought and a truly terrifying plague of locusts. Despite the attempts of some people to see the locusts as allegorical, we should take it as referring to a real event. In the light of this disaster, Joel calls on everyone to repent – old and young (1:2,3), drunkards (1:5), farmers (1:11) and priests (1:13). The disasters that have befallen Judah are merely a foretaste of the "Day of the LORD" and the people need to take seriously the warning that they carry.

Down through history there have been plagues and disasters which have caused people to think profoundly about what is happening in the world. They are reminders of God's judgement, but always fall short of complete annihilation, so that men and women have an opportunity to mend their ways and return to God. We might consider Joel's words in the light of the growing problem of HIV/Aids or the recent tsunami disaster.

Reminders of God's judgement Such things cannot be seen as God's punishment only on those who have sinned. It is not simply an issue of "cause and effect", as many people would like to think. (Such a view leads to homophobia – "the gay disease" – and racism – "the African disease".) We must remember that we are all sinners (*Romans 3:23*) and there are many activities which are as repugnant to God as promiscuous sexual activity. *"God's summons to judgement is, in the Bible, not normally a pronouncement of irrevocable doom, but an opportunity for repentance."*

The need for a real response before God In 2:12 we read of coming to God "with all your heart" and in the following verse of ensuring that this is not just outward show. We need to repent of our own sin before we begin to think of the sin of others. An outward show of religiosity is useless without some kind of inner change. But when we do repent, God is compassionate and will respond (2:13,14).

The call to intercede We also need to recognise the call to intercede on behalf of others. The priests of Joel's day were called to pray to God and we are the new priesthood in Christ. We must pray that God will show his grace and that his power and glory will be demonstrated so that people will not ask "Where is their God?"

The call is urgent The immediate call is to repentance and intercessory prayer (2:16). We cannot wait around for conferences and initiatives. And notice that everyone is to be involved. When the call is taken seriously, God will respond and restore the fortunes of his people (2:25-27). That doesn't mean that he never challenges us again, nor that his final judgement is averted.

Questions for discussion

1. What might we see as the equivalent of the plague of locusts today?
2. Does it not seem callous to use such disasters as an occasion for preaching? Why/why not?
3. Could we not say "it serves them right"? Why/why not?
4. How do you respond when people say "Where is their God?" (2:17) at times of disaster?
5. How can we impress on people the need for repentance?
6. What can we do to encourage real intercession on behalf of our world?