

Reading: Acts 2 vv 14-21

We are embarking today upon a programme of Sunday sermons on those books within our Bibles that are labelled **The Minor Prophets**.

Within the Old Testament, if you are a Prophet and you are not Isaiah with his 66 chapters, or Jeremiah with 52 or Ezekiel, or Daniel, you are Minor. There are twelve Minor Prophets.

Today, our Prophet has only three chapters, and he is, **Joel**.

Just before we get into Joel, may I say **a few words of welcome to the Twelve Minor Prophets, as an introduction.**

Jesus says of Himself that He has come to **fulfil** prophecy. “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets: I have come to fulfil them.*” (Matthew 5 v 17) (c f. Luke 10 v 24) He is referring to the Prophets of our Old Testament. If Jesus says His life and His mission fill up or complete their words of prophecy, then, for us, a deeper understanding of His life and mission require us to think about and know more of what those Prophets said.

For this reason Christians have said in their Creed “*I believe in the Holy Spirit, .... Who spoke by the Prophets.*” Again, the reference is to the Prophets of our Old Testament. Now these men, the Prophets, were both speaking and having their words recorded long before the descent of The Spirit at Pentecost. So, the Holy Spirit of God is active, we believe, in these men, the Prophets of the Old Testament.

Are they all men? The Minor Prophets all are, but there are women who were prophets, Deborah certainly, Rebecca perhaps. I hope we shall get on to them. And Ruth. And Esther.

What does the title “*prophet*” convey? In our Bibles the word really means one who speaks for another, speaks for God. You and I use it to mean a person who foretells the future. That development in the meaning of the word is interesting. The Prophets of the Old Testament predicted a future that actually came to pass.

The gift of prophecy was respected by the Hebrew people. In their history, there is, very early on, an acknowledgement of the place of the prophet within society. (I Samuel 9 – 10) Some people had been given what was seen as a gift of prophecy, and this included seeing the future and the announcement of oracles, or sayings. Those who heard were prepared to see a Divine voice behind the human words. In Deuteronomy Chapter 18, well into the monarchy, Moses is spoken of as a Prophet, when he says “*God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you*”. So, it bestows leadership.

Sometimes the oracle, or words, was accompanied by a symbolic action. Isaiah went naked to make one point (Isa 20); Jeremiah wore a yoke at another (Jer 27); Ezekiel had to lug a rucksack (Eze 12) at a third. It was however essentially the “word” of God which controlled the prophet and his inspired words passed on the Word of God to His People.

**To see the richness of God’s Word coming through the Prophets, it helps to know the history.** Two-thirds of our Minor Prophets we can put into the time bracket of eighth to sixth century BC, so they are speaking before wars that will be disasters, military invasions of the most destructive type. I need to remind you of the history.

- Just at the end of the second millennium before Christ, the people in Palestine established a monarchical nation state. The capital was Jerusalem. At the beginning of the tenth century BC, they split into two. Israel became the northern kingdom, with its capital at Samaria.
- Those who stayed faithful to the Davidic line of kings took their name from what had become the dominant tribe amongst them, Judah. This southern group kept David’s city of Jerusalem as their capital.
- This became a time of middle-eastern superpowers. Assyria was expanding. At the end of the eighth century BC, Assyria took by conquest Samaria, incorporating the territory of the northern kingdom into its empire, and brutally eliminating Israel.
- Judah kept a purer faith, with its Jerusalem cult. But not forever. Assyria was replaced by Babylon, and Babylon took Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century BC. Judah went into exile. *“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept.”* (Psalm 137)
- Babylon was followed by the Persians, and, you will recall because Ezra tells us, that King Cyrus allowed the exiles to return and settle again in Judea and Jerusalem. This is the post-exilic period.

Shall we note too, the theology. Again, to see the richness of God’s word here, we need to know what was the thinking before the Prophet spoke. The people who heard these prophetic words worshipped in sacred places a God who was the protector of their own people. Their God had intervened in their history, supremely in the action they celebrated annually at what they called the Passover. But we will see from the Prophets’ words just how undeveloped the Hebrews’ ideas were; in particular the link between ethics and faith seems weak.

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**Now let us look at Joel.** Apart from his father being named Pethu-el, we know nothing about the man Joel. You can conclude from his words that he was a poet. You may conclude from his imagery, that he might have been a countryman, a farmer.

We cannot with any certainty fix the date either when the words reported in his book were spoken, nor when they might have been written down. Scholars differ in their opinions. Some say this is material from the eighth century: other scholars say it is post exilic, perhaps early fourth century BC.

Possibly too, we have material here from more than one source. That means it may not all be from that one son of Pethu-el. So perhaps some earlier, some later. And there is confusion of subject matter if you read it through continuously.

Joel is a prophet of Judah. He speaks to the southern kingdom, with Jerusalem as its centre. This may have been in the period after the northern kingdom fell, when Judah maintained a precarious existence, and faced aggression. Or, perhaps, he is back in Jerusalem after the exile.

Joel describes the descent of a plague of locusts, and its result. Some commentaries say that his prophetic words are about a plague of locusts, and little else. The imagery is powerful as the swarming, hopping and destroying insects devastate the land. *“The sun and moon are darkened and the stars withdraw their shine”* (2 v 10). (cf 3 v 15)

The locusts are everywhere. They are as destructive as an invader. And look at Chapter one verse six, the locusts have become a destructive army, *“for a nation has come up against my land, powerful and without number”*, so are we being warned that a powerful enemy approaches. Is it Babylon? *“Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people.”* (2 v 2) The crops wither, the domestic animals suffer, and the people grieve. Even nature itself ceases to function: *“even the wild beasts cry out.”* (1 v 20)

God still says, *“Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning and rend your hearts and not your garments. So Joel says “Return to the Lord, your God for He is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil.”* (2 vs 12-13)

Then at Chapter 2 v 17 the oracles change gear. God restores. *“The Lord said, Behold I am sending to you grain, wine, oil and you will be satisfied”* (2 v 19). God will drive out the enemy. God will restore the natural order. *“You know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and my people shall never again be put to shame”* (2 v 27)

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## **What is there here in this Book of Joel for us?**

### **Early amongst these oracles, Chapter 1, v 15, Joel introduces us to the Day of the Lord.**

- That “Day of the Lord” is a repeated idea within the prophetic books. This is because, even then, the people were indeed awaiting a “Day of the Lord”, a sorting out, a cataclysmic ending bringing divine intervention into our world. Because they thought of themselves as God’s chosen, they were pretty sure that this day would be good for them. Not so, says Joel ..... *“For the Day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it?”* (2 v 11) *“The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible Day of the Lord comes.”* (2 v 31)

- But then, look at this - *“in that day, the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah will flow with water and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord, and water the valley (3 v 18).... Judah shall be inhabited for ever, and Jerusalem to all generations.... For the Lord dwells in Zion”.* (3 vs 20-21)
- The concept of the Day of the Lord grows. We Christians look at it through the filter of the promises made to us by Jesus about his own return in glory. Compare Matthew 24, and remember that we will “see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory”. Amen; even so, come Lord Jesus!
- Joel says of it: it’s a day of judgement upon His people, it’s a day of judgement upon their enemies. But it is the day of the power of God, of awesome, cataclysmic events. Joel feeds that idea into our thinking, into the spoken words of Jesus, and then on into our Book of Revelation.
- And it is also compatible with the scriptural texts to see *The Day of the Lord* entirely come to reality in Bethlehem as a child is born to Mary. You may need to think about that .....

**Not to overstate it because it comes more strongly from Isaiah, let us take from Joel the idea of “The Remnant”.**

- In Chapter 2 v 5, *“All who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered.”* And again, *“amongst the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls”.* (2 v 32)
- The idea is that God preserves a remnant of faithful people through whom His mission continues to advance. And the remnant is refined by suffering.
- When the whole world appears not to be on God’s side, nonetheless God is forging ahead with his purposes for us all. At the most critical moment of human history, actually **only one** Man was faithful, only one man was doing God’s work: the man Jesus Christ who died on the cross alone, but (Alleluia!) just look what was achieved!

**Perhaps the most striking section of this Book tells of the outpouring of God’s Spirit.**

- This is that part of Joel’s oracles which the Christian church has seized upon as predicting the event of Pentecost. St Luke in Acts 2 verses 17 to 21 specifically identifies this; Luke quotes Joel Chapter Two verses 28 to 32. *“And it shall come to pass ... that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions”.*
- The context is a wonderful restoration: *“When I restore the fortunes of Judah and to Jerusalem I will gather all the nations.”* (3 v 1)
- Gather **all the nations**; but (according to Joel) for judgement, for their treatment of the Hebrews. A judgement that ends badly: *“Prepare war! ....Beat your ploughshares into words and your pruning hooks into spears, let the weak say I am a warrior”* (3 v 9-10). Here then (in Joel) *the Day of the Lord* is a judgement upon the enemies of God’s chosen

people. The best advice I can give you is read it as referring to the spiritual fight for my soul against my besetting sins!

- Nonetheless, we will find, I think, that Joel's significance for us lies mainly in these passages concerning the Spirit. Joel says that the Spirit of God will speak through the prophecies, the dreams, the visions. These will become everyday, routine conversations between God and his people, reminding us of the close companionship of God, when He walked with the first man in the garden, that relationship which is restored and realised by the companionship of Jesus alongside **us** as we walk through life, through death and into glory.

Note that **Joel retains his belief in a Chosen People**. God's people have a role to play in God's wondrous purposes for our world. God Himself will safeguard that role: for "*The Lord is a refuge to His People, a stronghold to the people of Israel*" (3 v 16).

Note too **the awesome power of God**: "*the Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem and the heavens and the earth shake!*" (3 v 16).

Note above all, **The righteousness of God**.

- Of course, for Joel, the destruction is from God. We come to this point again and again as we look at Old Testament prophecy. The people had said "God will look after us, we are his chosen"; they had said this so many times it had become understood, a given. Now these people are being told: No, it is our God who is punishing us, it is our God who is bringing this disaster. To you and I, because we are Christians, this may be unhelpful.
- We must not lose sight of the reason that the Prophets spoke as they did. God had a Covenant with the people. Yes, they were the chosen People, but that was a privilege, and required human behaviour that was right. It is behind the whole prophetic effort that **the righteousness of God** burns. Joel says our God expects justice, equity, care of the poor, the sick, the weak. It is the Hebrews' failure to deliver these ethical, moral actions that brings the disaster. We could well ask ourselves, salvation being freely available to us, what difference has it made to our own activities?

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So, **Joel**, the prophet of locusts, judgement and restoration. The man who sees a restoration, an at-one-ment, through the Spirit descending, even as, in God's good time, the Archangel descends by the grace of God to our mother, Mary. And, of course, the atonement seen by Joel is a prediction of the final complete restoration of humanity's relationship with God, which we know is achieved by Jesus Christ.

Next week, if you are still here, I'll take on Amos, and the righteousness of God.

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