

SERMON: 2018/02/14 (Ash Wednesday, Year B) - Joel 2:1-2,12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 & Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

The prophet Joel, probably a citizen of (holy) Jerusalem herself[n.1], witnessed some *terrible* dark days for his city and nation.

It *seems*, from what he tells us, that there had been a locust swarm of unprecedented proportions, which had "swept" through the fertile valleys of ancient "Israel," and decimated the crops: I quote,

'Be dismayed, you farmers,
wail, you vinedressers,
over the wheat and the barley;
for the crops of the field are ruined.[1:11]

There was, in fact, so little food in the land, that even the precious, sacred cult of animal sacrifice at the Temple had to be suspended: there simply wasn't anything to butcher or to burn.[v.9]

Moreover, this disaster was then quickly followed by another: a drought, which compounded the people's misery - now they were starving *and* thirsty.[v.12]

But, incredibly, this wasn't even the end of it; which brings us to tonight's excerpt from chapter two.

Likely from a high vantage point on the fortifications that surrounded the capital, Joel looked out and saw something far more frightening and nightmarish than the suffering already being experienced: on the distant hills to the north - in what would be Galilee and Samaria - he saw the *massive* army of the Assyrian Empire encamped against the People of God.

Their force was so vast, that, for miles and miles, it looked as if a great, *thick* fog had descended across the countryside, [v.2]:

Countless battalions of battle-hardened infantry.

Cavalry units and chariots.

Cutting-edge war-machines that resembled tanks - armoured, wheeled "rhinoceroses" designed to tear down, bulldoze, and crush.

Archers and slingers from a "hundred" different (subjugated) nations.[n.2]

This 'northern horde' [v.20, NIV] had already reduced most of the (divided) kingdom to charred stubble.

Why had they come?

Historians aren't certain.

Possibly, says one, to 'gain control of that part of the...Arabian incense trade which passed through Gaza [to the south-west]'; [n.3].

But, whatever the reason, these invaders wouldn't be dislodged by the Jews - not without *divine* help: they were laughably - *drastically* - outnumbered and outgunned.

And what comfort does Joel offer his terrified audience, cowering behind their walls?

Only this: '[R]eturn to [the LORD] with all your heart, with fasting, [and] with weeping... perhaps *if* we do that God] will turn and relent...?' [v.14]

Maybe.

May-be. [See: *The Message translation in particular.*]

And that's it.

Yikes!

He didn't sound too sure did he?

Not very inspiring at all.

But, it transpires, he was right to hesitate:

In *2 Chronicles*, which is a record of this period, we learn that 'though[, in fact,]the city did *not* fall...[the Jews] suffered *heavy* casualties [in the fighting], and that a [very] large number of prisoners were deported...'; [28:5-8].[n.4]

(An exile before The Exile.)

This was, in other words, no victory.

There was nothing to celebrate:

The Jerusalemites survived only because, the author reveals, they paid off the Assyrian ruler, Tilgath-Pileser, with an *enormous* bribe that included their '[children]...and [their] wives' as prostitutes, [29:9].

And by this hefty, *humiliating* sum they bought themselves a reprieve.

But why does any of this matter to us?

Because what happened, you might say, is analogous to what *will* happen on "Judgement Day;" of a small minority spared an unhappy fate that most are running headlong towards.

Of course this only raises another question:

How, when Joel had so little confidence in the efficacy of his repentance, can I have any confidence in my own?

Because we now have something that was lacking then: 'an advocate with [our Creator], Jesus Christ the righteous; and [He has offered Himself as an] atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.' [2 John 2:1b-2]

He, then, has turned the tables (inextricably) in our favour.

Our ransom has also been paid [Heb. 9:15], and because it has we need not fear God's displeasure who, *instead*, waits for us not with condemnation but with arms open to embrace.

So, as the prophet urged, let's 'return' to Him [v.12] without reservation - and whilst we have the chance:

For, let's face it, we don't know when "Old Mr. Time" will finally catch up to us: tonight? Tomorrow? 10 years from now? And will he find me in my bed, a contented, *righteous* old man, surrounded by *committed, Christian* children and grand-children; or alone - a collapsed heap on a sidewalk with only an EMT or a concerned stranger at my side.

As the Psalmist acknowledges in his song, 'our days *are* like the grass; we flourish like a flower of the field [and w]hen the wind goes over it, it is gone'.

I pray, therefore, that we will use this Lent to increase not our 'treasures [here] on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal' [Mt. 6:19], but rather as a *gift* - a gift of *more* time, time in which we still have opportunity to improve our readiness for "meeting our maker" - by deepening our faithfulness to our heavenly Father's will as revealed in His perfect, *eternal* Son through our Scriptures, the Bible.

Amen.

Footnotes:

1. See: Hubbard, David Allan (2009), *Joel and Amos (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 28.
2. See: Healy, Mark and McBride, Angus (1991), *The Ancient Assyrians*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, esp. 20-23.
3. Mitchell, T. C. (1992), 'Israel and Judah from the Coming of Assyrian Domination until the Fall of Samaria, and the Struggle for Independence in Judah (c. 750-700 B.C.)', in Boardman, John; Edwards, I. E. S.; Sollberger, E. & Hammon, N. G. L. (Eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 322-370, 330.
4. *Ibid.*