

**Sermon: 2019/10/27 (20th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) - Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-185; & Luke 18:9-14\_BTR**

[Invite children to the front.]

Let's say that, one day, I lent my [Mrs Potatohead] to [George].

And he had lots of fun with it.

And then he decided to give it back, but he only gave me...[her] leg.

Or an arm.

Or [her ?].

Keeping the remainder for himself.

And then, imagine, he said to me: ""Fr." Ben, you are sooo(!) lucky that I gave you back that *one* piece of the [Mrs Potatohead] you gave me."

What would you say to that?

What would you say to [George]?

Would you say: "Well done, [George], you are a *really* generous person!"?

Hm?

What would you say to [him]?

[Pause.]

Just like the fact that there are many different churches in McMinnville, when Christ was on the earth, there were many different *Jewish* groups too:

There were Essenes, and Zealots, and Sadducees and...the Pharisees.

And the Pharisees took *very* seriously God's commandments in the Old Testament - all *six-hundred-and-thirteen* of them!

They felt pride about this.

They thought they were doing well at pleasing God, and, to an extent, that was true.

But Jesus told a story about how one Pharisee went to pray in the Temple, and he boasted to God!

He boasted to God about how faithful he was to the Commandments, and, in particular, about how he he was faithful to the requirement that he should give 10% of his income to the priests: [see Gen. 14:18-2, but esp. Lev. 27:30].

But Jesus wasn't impressed: *not at all!*

Yes, it was a good thing to obey the Commandments, like "tithing," but what the Pharisee had forgotten was that those rules were only the *minimum* of what a good person should do.

*Really*, God was very gracious to put "the bar" so low, and instead of boasting about giving 10% of his money, the Pharisee should have been *thanking* God that that was all he needed to give.

For what Got *actually* wants is *everything!*

Because everything belongs to Him:

He made it.

So, when we give our money or our time or our talents to the Church, we're actually only returning those things to their rightful owner.

Let's pray:

Lord God, ..., in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

The future can be a *very* scary place.

Particularly if you've very few resources to adapt to whatever may be "around the corner."

And many voices in recent times, on one "side of the aisle," at least, have begun to speculate in *very* stark, grave - some would say, "melodramatic" - terms about sea-level rises, crop shortages, and so forth.

And just now, we hear an *ancient* prophecy about something that sounds *a lot* like sudden, massive climate change: [Joel 2:30-31].

But the problem with "inspired" apocalyptic visions - like that we just heard from *Joel*, is that it isn't always clear what future moment they're referencing.

Or if more than one incident is in sight or many;

and if it is *many* different episodes being foreseen, whether, in the mind or the mouth of the prophet, those "episodes" might be, *unintentionally*, "flowing" together, intermingling, like separate paint dyes poured out into a bucket of water; to create a new, confusing mix that we, the audience, then needs to "untangle" - if we can, that is - with as much precision and clarity as can be mustered when we can't (personally) check the source material itself: which is the Holy Spirit.

And this *isn't* to say that I doubt *for a moment* the *named* prophets of the Holy Scriptures.

Their presence in its pages are because, *to some degree or in some part*, what they predicted had already *happened* in the lifetime of those - the editors - who eventually - *later* - assembled the sacred texts:

You see, there were many, *many* men who claimed throughout Israel's history that they had an inspired "Word from the Lord" to share, and we *don't* remember them all:

we don't have their writings in the Bible because some were charlatans; scam-artists.

The *true* spokespeople for God mention these "sleaze-bags;" these frauds with regularity:

Jeremiah, for example, who we've been hearing from in recent weeks, had repeated "run-ins" with another chap called, *Hananiah*:

*Hananiah* was a mate - a sycophant - of King Zedekiah of Judah.

And, following the *first* exile - the smaller of the two I previously mentioned that occurred, [n.1] he went around telling people not to worry, because God was about to punish the Babylonians for attacking Jerusalem; and that Jeconiah, the former king would be returned "safe and sound." [Jer. 28:1ff.]

And - as I know you know - this *never* actually transpired:

Jeconiah died, an old man, in Babylon.

Along with many others too!

And Jeremiah, who was receiving *genuine* revelations, called Hananiah out, right there, in the palace - in front of the whole court, saying: '...[many] prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many [of our enemies. But it didn't happen. Only the word of the prophet that] comes true...will be known [as one] truly sent [by the Lord].'

(That's chapter twenty-eight, verse eight and nine.)

In other words, then, Israel, the original "chosen people" before the Church, were just as credulous as you and I.

They didn't just believe everything they were told; and they actually exercised *careful* discretion about what was preserved as *proven* communication from God - and this we have a portion of in our hands this morning: [wave bulletin insert].

And we must *always* bear that in mind:

For we're inclined, in the modern era, to look back on earlier people as primitives; dullards; fantasists.

And we might transfer some of that arrogant attitude over into our regard; our attitude of reading the Old Testament, especially, stuff about End Times; the "eschaton." Judgement Day.

A frightening moment that Joel seems to be describing for us today.

*Or is he?!*

The more sceptical among us might think that Joel is, optimistically, only "dangling" the prospect that the Exile wasn't going to be the final end of his people, and that, eventually they would build and repopulate the "Promised Land."

That Joel was, in other words, saying *nothing* supernatural but only commonsensical - something likely; that he was hazarding a fair guess.

And at first what he says *could* be about merely the restoration of the Jewish people to Canaan under the Persian Empire.

And it is a pleasant, pleasing, bucolic picture, isn't it?

Believable.

Some rhetorical flair, yes, but not excessively over-blown.

Not ridiculous.

But *then* he speaks about the Jews 'never again be[ing] put to shame.'

He says it twice, even: [v. 26 AND 27].

And that *is* odd.

If Joel was merely "painting a picture" of probable life again in Palestine after the Babylonian Exile, it is patently false that everything just got better and better from that point forward:

The *current* nation of Israel *is* prosperous in a manner that does, in fact, "ring true" to the "glowing" situation Joel envisages, but its founding came "on the back" of the Holocaust!

Could there be a more terrible, *monstrous* "shaming" than that?

Going further back, there was also, following the return from Exile, the oppression of the Jews under the Seleucids and the Ptolemies, and, of course, in Jesus' day, under the Romans!

And, speaking of Jesus, notice that Joel says '[t]he sun shall be turned to darkness': [v.31].

*That* reminds me very much of Christ's crucifixion, which is coming up again shortly in our Sunday readings before Advent.

And *Luke* will tell us that - I quote: 'It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land...

Then...Jesus breathed His last.' [Lk. 23:44-46]

But the prophet mentions too 'columns of smoke', the moon turning red 'to blood', and so on, and *none* of *these* particular details are mentioned in any of the gospels.

Which suggests, to me, that Joel is, rather, seeing much further ahead than the original Good Friday.

Perhaps it is of "The World-to-Come," then?

But what do we make of the mention of 'slaves' (in the passage)?

Do we *really* think that there will be such in Paradise?!

That makes no sense to me.

Slaves in Heaven?

No.

Only a Fallen, confused, perverse *human*-governed regime would permit such a thing as people-as-property.

Jesus' return is *exactly* to abolish once-and-for-all anything of that kind, whether its overt manifestations or those of a more subtle kind: sex-work, human-trafficking, etc.

Which leads me to think that, in the final analysis, perhaps, we have here a "jumble" of truths...

A "stir-fry."

A mixture, perhaps, of different epochs and moments being conflated.

That the wisdom of God, who stands outside of time, when expressed through a human medium, emerges with some "static" - like a confusion of more than one "station" on the car-radio.

*But all of it accurate and important.*

And's what most important of all?

That there is a "book-end" to all this [gesticulate to take in everything]:

that there is a period [full-stop] coming at the end of the sentence which is humanity's existence. *And yet*, we hear, that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' - shall, by His astonishing love, endure beyond to see something entirely new: a beginning after the end. So, let's pray - *and work* - that more shall do what the prophet says that people ought.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

#### Footnotes:

1. Randall, Benjamin T., 'Sermon: 2019/10/13 (18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) - Jeremiah 29:1,4-7; Psalm 66:1-11; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; & Luke 17:11-19\_BTR', available at <http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Sermon-20191013-18th-Sunday-after-Pentecost-Year-C-Jeremiah....pdf>