

Sermon preached by The Right Reverend Martin Seeley

Ash Wednesday Solemn Eucharist, 7.00 pm

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Wednesday 17 February 2021

Joel 2:1-2.12-17; John 8:1-11

Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.

We read from the book of Joel on two particular occasions in the church's year. Today, Ash Wednesday, and then at Pentecost, when we read from later in the same second chapter, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."

It is a very short book, Joel, just 3 chapters, and in that short scope contains the promise of judgment, and the promise of hope.

We hear the judgment in today's reading. "Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes."

A great and powerful army, not of soldiers, but of locusts. A plague, a devastating plague is threatening the land. This army, Joel declares, has teeth like lions' teeth, fangs of a lioness, laying waste the vines, splintering the fig trees, devastating the fields, destroying the grain.

Plagues of locusts were not – are not – unusual. The Book of the Prophet Joel, does not identify a particular time, a particular circumstance for the people of Israel – it is quite hard to date – but rather it presents the timeless message, making the devastating connection between a people turning away from the Lord and the Lord’s terrible judgement; and then, conversely, if the people repent, the Lord will relent and bless them.

And here we are, a year of plague sweeping indiscriminately and unrelentingly across the land, across the world. And we echo the prophet when he declares, “Has such a thing happened in your days, or the days of your ancestors?” Have we ever seen the like of this?

Walter Brueggeman, the great American Old Testament scholar, wrote recently, “It is possible to trust that the God of the gospel is in, with and under the crisis of the virus without imagining God caused it. As God often does, in hidden ways God may be amid the crisis to do the hard work of checking arrogance and curbing hubris.”

Our modern minds resist saying the plague is God’s judgement upon us. But we can still say and need to say, while God does not cause it, God’s judgement is upon us for what the pandemic has revealed, has exposed about humanity, about our way of life, about our attitudes and behaviours, about our presumptions and prejudices.

What Brueggeman calls our arrogance and hubris.

And the Lord says, return to me with all your heart.

The year of pandemic has revealed things we may have been dimly aware of, or perhaps not aware of at all; it has been a season of epiphany, a season of revelation – of, in the true sense of the word, a season apocalypse – an uncovering.

So we have seen how we as a world are intimately and fundamentally connected, interconnected, part of a whole. The indiscriminate spread of the virus has made that very clear. The burden of suffering and grief felt across the world has made that very clear. The unprecedented speed, marshalling of expertise and determination among scientists across the world to find treatments and vaccines, has made that very clear. The outpouring of care, of sacrifice, of compassion, of incredible generosity, of exhausting devoted service from health professionals, key workers, teachers, parents, neighbours, volunteers, has made that very clear. These have all been grounds for the promise of hope.

But what has also been made very clear are things about our world that are so terribly wrong. And this is God's judgment.

The disproportionate impact of the virus on the poor, on those of minority ethnic heritage, on the disabled; the inadequate resources and indeed priority for the care of our elderly; decisions by governments placing economic priorities way ahead of saving lives; and governments denying their people protection by denying the virus is even present; the impact on the young with mental health challenges unprecedented in any previous generation. We have seen great divisions in our nation and in the world come into sharp relief – between races, between the wealthy and the rest, between the powerful and privileged and the rest. And we have had revealed to us what could be done to care for the environment if we had the will to do so. All this has been made very clear.

Pope Francis wrote recently, “Consider...the distance between our need to protect and regenerate mother earth and an economic model that regards growth at any cost as its prime objective... the disruption of COVID has turned the tables inviting us to stop, alter our routines and priorities and to ask: what if the economic, the social and the political challenges we face are really different faces of the same crisis? What if they have a common solution? could it be that replacing the objective of growth with that of new ways of relating will allow for a different kind of economy - one that meets the needs of all within the means of our planet?”

The Pope wrote these words in a recent book entitled, “Let us Dream: the path to a better future” and of course the echo of the hope expressed in the book of Joel does not elude us.

If there is a day to name this judgment that has been revealed to us, and to face it, Ash Wednesday is that day. And if there is a season to ask God what God would have us do about it, to move from judgment to hope, then Lent is that season.

And the Lord says return to me with all your heart.

This is not straightforward. Let’s change the scene to the temple precincts of our gospel reading. And so we can perhaps imagine ourselves in those temple precincts, on the edge of a crowd, an eager accusing crowd. People can and will come to point the finger. Point the finger away from themselves and blame others. Taking no responsibility and distracting from the judgment and its demands that this pandemic has revealed.

They will try that. But they like us are all involved, and no one can hide from that, and we can *all* make a difference if we work together in the same ways we have for good

during this pandemic. We are not without sin, and not without sin in relation to what has been revealed during this past year, but we can repent. None of us can throw that first stone.

Yet even now says the Lord, return to me with all your heart. Return to the Lord your God, Joel declares, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

So we move from back of the crowd to the front, and stand with the accused.

Our personal sins, and indeed our very private sins, are important to confess if we are to stay close to the Lord, who will indeed forgive us and tell us not to sin again. But what Jesus is saying to us in this story is that what is larger than each of our private sins is our collective sin, against the just and Godly ordering of the world. That was his judgment on the scribes and pharisees. The Old Testament prophets inveigh against the corporate sins of the people – the neglect of the widow, the neglect of the poor, the greed of the rich, the arrogance of the powerful. Jesus repeats the same collective challenge to the leaders, the powerful, to those who manipulate society for their own ends, and who have no care for the poor.

Return to me with your whole heart.

We know this is what it means. Confessing our own individual faults is part of that, but it is selfish if that is where we stop. We are all in this together, society is hurting, people are hurting, revealed and made worse through this agonising pandemic.

Return to the Lord your God. And so we do. Not as accusers and witnesses to another's sin. But as penitents to confess our own part in the world's sin. We stand

beside the woman caught in adultery, herself caught up in a society where the man involved was not culpable, where men got away with it. We stand beside her, and listen to our Lord.

He does not condemn us, but calls us to stop sinning. This is his charge to us as we walk into Lent, in the light of the judgment the pandemic has revealed. We have been given an opportunity, the world has been given the opportunity, to reset how we live, how life is ordered, not a resetting that comes from human plans but from God's justice and compassion. This is the promise of hope. Jesus tells us that with him, returning to him, we can do something about the plight of the poor, the neglected, the left out, we can do something about the racism that afflicts our society, we can do something about the care and honouring of the elderly. And we can do something about the environmental crisis.

We can walk with our Lord through Lent, having repented, asking for his guidance on what we can each do, and what we can together do, so that we begin to emerge from this time of revelation, this time of judgment, to a world refashioned from the promise of hope.

We know we can, with the Lord. We can dream dreams, and see visions. After the promise of judgment comes the promise of hope.

And the Lord says, return to me with all your heart.

Thanks be to God.

The Right Reverend Martin Seeley

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