



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 21st May 2023
Readings: Joel 1.10-12 and 2.18-29; Matthew 13.1-9 and 31-32
Ascension 1

We don't know much about this prophet Joel. Not knowing when he lived leaves us puzzling about the nature of the crisis in the land to which he addresses himself. That said, it is clear from the description of 'devastated fields' that the nation is in some sort of turmoil. That's reinforced by the threat of an overwhelming invasion of locusts. As a prophet of the Lord, Joel's message at such a time urges the dismayed people to appeal to God for restoration. In the second half of our reading, from a chapter farther into the book, Joel is assuming that Israel has heeded his message, and tells of the Lord reversing the natural disaster. There will be both physical and spiritual renewal.

The vagueness of what crisis Joel is referring to perhaps makes it easier for us to apply his basic message to *any* place and time. So, I think I can hear him speaking to our own era, with its pervading sense of uncertainty, complexity, and elusive absolutes. Facing economic, ecological, ecumenical, and ethical challenges, we do well to take seriously their potential to wreak havoc. It may not be a swarm of locusts – though, as if it did not have ample to contend with, the harvest in Afghanistan's breadbasket is under threat this year because of voracious swarms of them. And even though we might complain about hose pipe bans when East Anglia's aquifers get low, a water shortage such as Joel implies is not *really* our experience. But it *is* in Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia, where the current unrelenting drought that is gripping the Horn of Africa finds more than 20 million people facing acute food insecurity. Locusts and drought are nevertheless potent imagery for our troubled times, and Joel's stridently graphic lament, 'Be dismayed!', somehow rings true. It is as if he is calling us back to God, there to seek rescue and renewal.

The credibility of our turning to walk with God is not simply that we say the right things. Of course, our words do matter – what we sing in church, and what we say to the world. But what we *do* is a far more authentic sign that we are signed up to God's agenda. The witness of Jesus Christ is, too. He could spin a really good yarn to make his point. How impoverished we'd be without the tales of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. Neither of those parables, though, expresses Jesus's commitment to walking the way of the Lord as much as his actions do - actions that culminate in the cross, where in a single moment, once and for all, he gave redeeming effect to the claim that he serves to save.

It's the same for us. What we say is usually – even if not universally - far less impactful than what we do. The parable of the mustard seed – or is that the pigeon pea? – encourages us to trust that even the smallest of our actions makes a difference. Giving a fiver to Christian Aid may not seem much on its own, but it *is* when we see it as a complement to everyone else's fiver that's dedicated to helping people help themselves. Pausing to spend a moment in conversation with a homeless person costs us nothing, but it might bestow enough dignity upon them that their day is made bearable. Giving Pasta or sanitary towels to the Foodbank requires little of us when we are the giver, but when we're the recipient it pushes us over the boundary from too little to just enough. And scribbling our signature on a petition seeking more-public-toilets-that-are-open-later in this seriously inconvenient city takes but a nano-second, yet maybe, just maybe it will make us more humane and civilised for residents and tourists alike. 'It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree.' (Matthew 13.32)

And when the insatiable locust of scepticism creeps into our hearts, tempting us to do nothing because it is not worth it, or because it may be exploited, or because it's too little too late, then we might let the parable of the sower be like an earworm that haunts us. Some seeds have *always* fallen on soil too thin to let them take root. Some seeds have always fallen on the path and been stolen by the birds. Some seeds have always been scorched and ruined by the sun. *But still the sower goes a-sowing*, and, despite exceptions, lavish, luscious harvests are reaped.

And so it is with our good deeds. Yes, in an imperfect world there will be unscrupulous charities, exploitative beggars, and do-gooders whose compassion is discredited by their incompetence, but that doesn't mean the vast majority of 'good causes' are unworthy of support. Alongside good government, for which it is the church's vocation to pray, they enable us to be a society distinguished by a determination that none will be content with having a surfeit until all have sufficient.

It certainly takes vision resolutely, persistently to sow mustard seeds and pigeon peas, and maybe sometimes our vision flags. So it is that Joel says to us, just as much as to whomsoever he was speaking centuries ago, that we need the Holy Spirit, for our children to prophesy, our elders to dream dreams, and our youth to see visions, until the enslaved are free from whatever it is that traps them. The Spirit of Pentecost, indeed ... but that's for next week. Watch this space.

N. P. Uden

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