



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for Ash Wednesday Joel 2:12-17 & St. Matthew 6:16-21

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Our Epistle today from Joel gives us a unique opportunity to view not only the day's Gospel, but the entire season of Lent from the perspective of Israel's story. Joel's ministry as a prophet likely took place at some point after the exile and the contents of the book summon Judah to repentance as the nation faced the devastation wrought by a horrible plague of locusts. We get a sense of the severity of the plague in the first chapter, where it is revealed that the locusts have consumed even the vines and stripped the fig trees of their bark. These are not the normal food of locusts. They are what locusts would turn to once everything else had been consumed. The vine and the fig tree being symbols of peace and prosperity, their consumption by locusts speaks to the desperate situation of the nation. As 1:13 notes, the priests lamented before the altar for there was neither grain nor drink left in the land to offer to the Lord.

Repeatedly the prophet speaks of Day of the Lord, a day to which Israel looked with eager anticipation. One day the Lord would arise from his throne, he who had tamed chaos to create an ordered cosmos, and he would do the same again. The Lord would arise to bring justice to his people and to set all to rights. Israel's perennial problem was that she always saw herself as the innocent victim. On the Day of the Lord her enemies would be vanquished and she would be vindicated. It occurred to few that the Day of the Lord might turn out to be a judgement on Israel's own sins. This gets at the heart of Joel's

prophecy. The Day of Lord has come and his own people have found themselves the focus of his judgement.

The book is a call to repentance. Judah stands condemned for having offered the outward sacrifices of grain, wine, and oil, while the people had not truly dedicated their hearts to the Lord. But Joel reminds the people that this is not the end. The purpose of the Lord's discipline is to bring repentance and with repentance will come restoration. "Even now," declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart... Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster" (vv. 12-13).

This does not mean that the outward trapping of religion and of repentance are unnecessary. Through the prophet the Lord summons his people to fast, to weep, to mourn—but to do so from the heart and as evidence of true repentance. Lest they are tempted to make a show of rending their garments, the Lord declares it is more important that they first rend their hearts.

The need for corporate repentance is highlighted as well. The priests are to take their place "between the vestibule and the altar" to weep and cry out for mercy while the entire nation joins them: the elders and the children—even the bride and bridegroom are to suspend their honeymoon that the whole nation take part in this corporate act of repentance.

In response to the honest repentance of the nation, the Lord promises restoration—even that one day he will solve Israel's heart problem by pouring out his Spirit. In that day he will establish his people forever and put an end to their enemies. Here our Epistle, even as we enter our Lenten fast, sets our eyes on Easter and on the age to come that burst forth from the empty tomb. Even as we are reminded by the old Israel of the importance of penitence, both as individuals and

corporately as the Church, we are also reminded that we are not the old Israel; we are the new Israel, the people who live on the other side of the Lord's promise to pour out his Spirit.

As we read today's Gospel we see Jesus addressing the same old problem. Many in Israel continued to put on a show of outward piety, while their hearts were far from the Lord. Jesus warns that those who put on a show for others have received all they will ever receive for their efforts. They may receive respect and honour from those around them, but it has not moved God. Think again of the Day of the Lord, that day when the people of Israel anticipated the Lord coming to defeat their enemies, to set all to rights, and to reign forever. Many people fasted and made public acts of repentance in anticipation of that day. Jesus' warning in light of that should have been frightening. As the Messiah, he was setting in motion the events that would culminate in the Day of the Lord and here he warns that those who have made an insincere show of repentance will have no share in that day. Rather, those who, to use the language of Joel, have rent their hearts rather than their garments, are the ones whom the Father will see and reward—they are the ones who will know the age to come.

Let your investment be in the age to come, Jesus exhorts the people. Investment in the things of this age will not last. Moth and rust corrupt and thieves break in and steal. More importantly, our investments in the values and systems of the present evil age are foolish in light of the inauguration of the age to come by Jesus. We're reminded of the Quinquagesima Epistle from 1 Corinthians 13. If even the good, God-given gifts of tongues and prophecy will one day cease to have a purpose when the age to come as been consummated, how much more ought we to hold lightly to the praises of others and to investment in the values, systems, and institutions of the age

that is passing away. Instead, Jesus encourages his people to lay up treasures in heaven. It's important to note that Jews did not understand "heaven" the way many Christians unfortunately do, as referring to "up there" or "the next life". In Jewish thought—as it should be in Christian thought—heaven is God's realm as earth is ours and Jesus has accomplished the work to heal the breach between them caused by human sin and rebellion. One day heaven and earth will be rejoined. One day, as the Jews had always hoped, all will be set to rights and evil wiped from the face of the earth. It is that dawning age into which we ought to be investing, knowing that what we do out of love for God and love for each other in this age is what will last into the age to come.

Israel struggled with repentance and so did the people surrounding Jesus. They lived in anticipation of the fulfilment of the Lord's promise to pour out his Spirit and to set right the hearts of his people. There is, necessarily then, a difference between our season of penitence and theirs. We live on the fulfilment side of the Lord's promise. We are the people in whom the Spirit of God dwells and that has changed everything. Nevertheless, we too live in anticipation of the day when all will finally be set to rights and so it is just as important for us to set our eyes on Jesus and to commit ourselves to investing in the thing of his kingdom.

Brothers and Sisters, this is the purpose of our Lenten fast. Each year the Church calls us to slow down, to take a break, and to fast so that we can, for at least these few weeks, invest some time that we wouldn't normally invest in considering God's word, in considering the gospel, in considering what Jesus has done for us by his death and resurrection, to make a point of being deliberate about our love for each other and, especially for the poor and needy, so that as we approach Easter, we will have our

eyes more firmly set on Jesus and the new life and the new creation that lie before us.