

Sermon for Harvest 26th September 2021.

Joel 2.21-27, 1 Timothy 6.6-10, Matthew 6.25-33

**May I speak in the Name of the Father and the Son
and the Holy Spirit, Amen.**

Some lovely scriptures of hope and provision this morning. Perfect for Harvest! Harvest is an important time of year, because it encourages us to be thankful for the basic necessities of life: our food and drink. It reminds us that we depend on the seasons and the weather, on soil and small insects, all designed to work in balance by our Creator God.

It also reminds us that we depend on the hard work of farmers, packers, transporters and shop workers to receive the food we buy in our markets and supermarkets. It's also a time of joy as we see once again how God provides, for not only us, but all creatures and plants on the earth, and how we're cared for and loved.

But today's readings also take us beyond this, to think about our relationship with wealth and possessions. So I would like to look at Joel. Joel was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah between 835-796 BC, about the same time Elisha was prophesying to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 848 BC. Joel's message could quite easily have been General Antonio Guterres, Secretary General to the UN in his address this week. I listened spell bound as this man took no prisoners and pulled no punches and described a world worthy of our God, a world of human rights and human dignity, a world where wealth is shared and resources distributed more equally from rich nations to poorer nations and where nations built up mutual trust and cooperation to stop conflict and wars, and build hope and a future for all. And start to

cooperate in ways which might save our beleaguered planet from the devastation of climate change. I think Joel would have been proud and thoroughly approved of such a speech. But Joel went further, all these admirable changes where humankind communicates and cooperates with each other must be steered by a turning back to God. An understanding that He is in control and that turning from Him will bring about judgement.

The people Joel spoke to had become complacent and self centred. They took God for granted and worshipped idols. So like many nations today, whose gods are money, status, power and maybe even a religious fervour, which is inward looking and intolerant of others. We don't need God, some will say, look at our abundance. We don't want to share with others, let them find their own fortune and work in their own countries. It isn't our responsibility. Judah was like that, insensitive to the condition of their spiritual lives, Joel warned them of impending judgement, but they remained oblivious to their own spiritual poverty. The odd sacrifice, a meaningless outward religious offering would suffice, they'd been to the Temple, done their bit, life was good without God.

But disaster struck. A terrible plague of locusts and other destructive swarming insects chewed their way through every overflowing field until nothing was left. Fields once rich and abundant were now empty of crops. It affected animals as well as agriculture. The magnitude of the destruction was so devastating that it would take a long time to recover from it.

Joel spoke of judgement to these people, but God also gave him a beautiful message of hope. Some of the loveliest verses in prophecy, including the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. God wasn't just filling their barns with abundance, He was giving of Himself as well, filling the people themselves with His rich fruit and gifts.

When disasters strike, people will tend to blame God rather than take responsibility themselves. Judah didn't, they repented, took responsibility and understood that their own actions had brought judgement. We have seen disaster after disaster over this last two years: terrible disasters of nature, floods, fires, volcanic eruptions, excessive heat and its consequences and earthquakes. No country has been left unscathed and the global Pandemic has left its scar on almost every household worldwide.

In our lives and in history, as in the Old Testament histories of Israel and Judah, there are times of devastation, but there are also times of restoration, hope and growth. Sometimes God may use natural disasters to awaken our senses to what we are doing to the world but more often, our suffering is a direct result of our own destructive choices. And that is what Joel was telling Judah and that is what Guterres was telling the leaders of the nations of the world. If we wish to harvest peace and abundance, we must sow the seeds of mutual trust and cooperation. If we want our world to heal, we must change our ways, together, in agreement and mutual sharing, not coveting more and more wealth but ensuring the resources of this planet are equally distributed. Guterres compared the frolics of a billionaire in space with the starvation of millions and called it obscene. And the fact that vaccines in richer countries were being thrown away, as out of date, whilst poorer countries had only 10% of their population vaccinated. He said the world leaders got an F for ethics. So wonderful, just like the power of the Old Testament prophets!

In Timothy and The Gospel, we are urged to be content with the basics of life, food and clothing. Not because God doesn't want us to enjoy good things, but to remember that trusting in God, we can hope to have our needs met, not all our wants, but our needs. He is our Father and wants us to know hope and abundance, He promised Judah that He would restore the years of the locust and

that their fields would be full again and they would prosper, but they must put Him first. And this is what Jesus and Timothy are saying, if you put God first, and not worry about getting the next thing on your list of must haves, you will want for nothing.

Timothy's warning came just after urging the people to be aware of false teachings and about thinking of religion as "a means of gain". A bit like the TV Evangelists who say that if you send them money, God will bless you with wealth and riches beyond your imagining.

For although money and possessions are not wrong in themselves, we might not remember that they are gifts from God and instead think that we have a right to everything we want. And feeling like this, we might lose our sense of gratitude and joy. Our sense of generosity to others and caring for those who cannot care for themselves

In a similar way Jesus' words in the Gospel about God giving us what we need, come just after he's pointed out that we can't serve both God and wealth. Here he's contrasting being possessed by God with being possessed by our possessions.

If we focus on always having more and better, we may forget about our responsibility to care for the earth, to feed and clothe those in need, to ensure justice for the powerless, to protect the weak and vulnerable.

We might become blind to the effects of greed on the environment in terms of pollution and waste.

We might close our eyes to the people who live in poverty and work in harsh conditions to provide us with what we want.

But if, as with the Harvest, we see all these things as good gifts from God that we can be thankful for and enjoy, we need no longer hold on to things we possess.

And if we trust in God rather than in wealth then we can relax, knowing that the God who cares for the smallest birds and flowers, understands our needs and cares for **us** even more.

So yes, we can have good things, but Harvest reminds us to give thanks to the source of all good things, to remember our God and to be generous, as He is generous. To be open to His guidance in the way we give to others in need.

Then we can be glad and rejoice, knowing that we have a loving and generous God, and that **we** are His people.

Amen.