

JOEL a timely prophet

I have taken great strength over the years from a verse in the book of Joel. 'I will restore unto you the years that the locusts have eaten.' Joel 2. 25
I don't know whether you have had periods in your life that have been wasted or lost or just eaten up like a grasshopper plague. I recall one such time after a very public outcry against a million dollar loss for a festival I directed for the government 30 years ago. It seemed unfair and unwarranted but it really hurt and there was never an acknowledgement of creative artistic success and its game changing contribution to youth music thereafter. I retired from view for over 15 years and only surfaced when I came to live on Eyre Peninsula. You are testimony to God's promise to me. 'I will restore unto you the years that the locusts have eaten.'

Let's hear the words of the prophet and think of our own world today.

Joel, the 9th BC Jewish prophet, preached against a backdrop of a national disaster. There was a devastating invasion of locusts and it just stripped the land of everything that was green. Like scorched earth the locusts moved over the country and there was a time of economic depression. Also, Joel knew that there was an army, Assyria, that would come and invade Israel.

The only way to avoid this catastrophe was for the nation to repent in fasting and prayer. Joel tells the people to rend their hearts rather than their garments and turn back to their gracious Lord, so that he may act against such disasters. For Jews, the heart was the centre of feeling and thinking. To return to the Lord a person must present an inward sign 'rend your hearts' – an outward sign 'rend your garments' was not enough.

They did and God 'was roused on behalf of his land and had compassion upon his people'. 'Rains will come, the threshing floors will fill to overflowing and God's presence will be seen and felt.'

Why did they believe all this? In Exodus we read, 'Now therefore, if you will listen to me and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own treasure and a holy nation.' Exodus 19.5-6 The essential point of the prophecy is that Joel tells his audience to return to the Lord completely as the only means of surviving. For Joel the locusts and drought are examples of what the Lord can do when his people break the covenant. He speaks of a terrible day of judgement. But he also writes that there is still time to return to the Lord.

He commands the people to mourn, weep, sanctify a time of fasting and call a solemn assembly of all inhabitants from young to old. Joel believes that his people already know that their behavior is in violation of what God wants.

It's not difficult to think of our own situation as we consider this story. First world countries are so consumed by greed that we have forgotten our good God. The surfeit of material goods that we consume beyond our immediate needs fills our stomachs but dulls our minds.

Jesus said, 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' Matt. 6. 19-24
The treasure of many are material goods, comfort, wealth, luxury, power, sensual gratification and technological escape. When any of these elements become an end in themselves, when they distract us from God and the commandment to love him and our neighbor, they become idols.

When Joel prophesied of the impending calamity many centuries ago, he described it in terms of a public disaster that would come upon all the land. he used words like destruction and pestilence that are still meaningful today, especially with our recent experience of earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes and tornadoes the latter most recently in Blyth near Clare.

Who really is our God? God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love'... Joel 2.12.13 And what would result from heartfelt repentance? 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh...' Joel 2.26 While this occurred centuries later at Pentecost, God continues to gift us with his Spirit at our baptism and as we seek him he will light up our lives.

Let us pray

'Merciful God,
in your Son you call not the righteous but sinners to repentance:
draw us away from the easy road that leads to destruction,
and guide us into paths that lead to life abundant,
that in seeking your truth, and obeying your will,
we may know the joy of being a disciple of Jesus Christ our Saviour,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. **AMEN**

rdb.Cummins.23/10/16

