

Joel 1: 1-14 "The Empty Field"

A sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool on 17/10/10

At Christ Church every week, we read a bit of the Bible and someone talks about it. Going to look at a book of the Bible called Joel, but before we get there, just need to talk about question. Your answer to which will change the way that you understand what Joel is talking about.

What is a person for? What makes a successful attempt to be human? What are people here for?

Here is one answer accepted by a growing number of people especially in Western societies today put forward by a rather famous self proclaimed enemy of religious faith:

"We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes. This is a truth which still fills me with astonishment."

Lots of people think Richard Dawkins is a hero when it comes to exposing evils of religion, but I think few of us could buy into his view that what makes a successful human being is that they survive. Hitler's biggest crime was not that he didn't make his whole lifespan. Robert Mugabe is 76 and still going strong.

There is more, isn't there, to what a person is, maybe more accurately, what a person is for, than merely survival. Instinctively we know that there is particular value to what people can do, beyond the material and beyond surviving. Let's hear someone else's view, poet called Elizabeth Jennings, her view on what makes a successful person.

Such love I cannot analyse;
It does not rest in lips or eyes,
Neither in kisses nor caress.
Partly, I know, it's gentleness

And understanding in one word
Or in brief letters. It's preserved
By trust and by respect and awe.
These are the words I'm feeling for.

Two people, yes, two lasting friends.
The giving comes, the taking ends
There is no measure for such things.
For this all Nature slows and sings.

All nature slows and sings (way the world actually feels changes) when we relate to each other well, truly. Giving comes and taking ends. Words I'm feeling for – we know what makes a human being great not success in amazing ways, not surviving the longest, but love, compassion friendship, sense of that, hard to feel for the words that really express it.

I don't know how much you know about the Bible. Book contains lots of poetry: it gives us pictures which help us grasp these big real truths of life, things we can't observe or measure but we know are real. Doesn't write off our experience, count our value as survival machines, but helps us really get our heads round what is going on when we know and feel that is true – nature slows and sings when people love.

One poetic picture it uses is of people as plants. We are like trees, vines, plants which are designed not just to survive but to produce fruit. Plants are planted plugged in to the right things, good soil, with enough water they produce the right fruit, and lots of it.

Picture of people – produce what human beings should produce, more than survival, but love, true humanity when they are planted, rooted in the right things. Human beings are capable of much more than survival, but of bearing fruit that will last, according to Jesus, central figure of Christianity.

Book of Joel makes a lot of that picture. People being like plants which are supposed to bear fruit. But he is specifically addressing a particular case. What are we to make of it when as human plants, we don't have the fruit we were designed to bear?

Reading: Joel 1: 1-14

Written to a people whose national life in history, is there to help us understand that we are plants that should be bearing fruit.

In their case it was physical fruit, vines and fig trees, grain and oil. God had promised these people that they would be in relationship with him, connected to him, planted in him, blessing on them for that relationship would be the physical fruit of the land that they lived in.

For us a picture of a more profound truth, way of helping us understand, that the successful human life is about more than survival, it's about showing the fruit that comes from being planted in, knowing, God. Designed to do, much more than just survive.

As we can see from our reading, these people had no fruit left.

(Point) **There is nothing left**

Joel thinks that this is worth calling a national meeting about, and then recording in a national archive that will be repeated ad nauseam to everyone's children and grandchildren and so on.

Clear, that whatever is going on, it's not only serious, unprecedented, Joel, the writer, thinks it has some significance that means it needs to be repeated.

There is nothing left – be honest – not exactly sure what the difference between a destroying locust and a swarming locust (all locusts swarm and destroy) but point – 4 plagues in a row nothing left.

Hard for us in our non-agrarian industrialised culture to understand the fear with which people regard locusts – huge swarms. Up to a billion locusts eating everything they land on – known to block out the sun – some people come from cultures where the threat of locust swarms is extremely terrifying and serious because of their ability to wipe out – 4 swarms in a row. Nothing left.

In verse 6, Joel says this is like being beaten in a war, by a totally irresistible army, vicious teeth that eat everything.

Total devastation, never been anything like it. Joel trying to help people make sense of it.

Sherlock Holmes. Shock at discovering Moriarty was.

Compare to another TV programme: Murder She Wrote. Usually can tell who the murderer is before the murder has happened.

Joel is making this more like Murder She Wrote – he is not stupid, he is picking out these particular results of the locust plague for a reason, clues to what is really going on:

A series of clues:

All that provided for the people is gone: livelihoods, means they cannot survive. No vines, no figs, no grain. Not even the basic things left to eat. Staple diet gone. Supposed to be in a relationship with the God who made the world, who had promised them success in this land. A relationship with God so close is like a husband and wife. Nothing left to provide for themselves. Told to mourn like a woman who has lost their husband. Clue?

The ground is dried up – footnote, that could be that the ground mourns. Such a disaster that even the ground itself is mourning. Floods in Pakistan a couple of weeks ago and showed pictures of ground with everything just swept away and done for, when rain stops dry and dusty and dead – accurate description of devastation – the ground itself is dried up and mourning.

The ground had a special significance for these people, because they viewed their ground, their land as a gift from God because he loved them and cared for them. Ground is not just a victim here, the ground itself is weeping almost as if this great token that was supposed to grow fruit and display God's blessing on the people is itself crying out. Clue to real problem?

Joy has withered away (12) Pomegranate, palm, apple, what was supposed to be food for celebration has totally gone. No more gladness, no more joy, dried up, withered away. Life has become totally about survival and nothing more, maybe not even that. There is no celebration, no real joy, dried up from the sons of men. Surely knowing the God who made the world, being his people should lead to great joy, huge gladness, lots of celebration. Clue to problem?

Maybe verse 13 the biggest clue of all – response in this culture to trouble was to go and make an offering to your God, but there is nothing left to give. Anything that they could have offered is gone – no way to make it back to God, no way to show him we are serious, there is nothing left to give him. Best the priests can do is put on some sackcloth and cry. No way left to relate to God. Clue?

People who come to this church who have experienced real famines. Going to talk about how this is a picture for us of something, people who have actually seen this will know what it actually means for gladness to have dried up, face death of themselves or their loved ones each day, nothing to eat, and the ground itself provides no comfort only mourning. Minimise that in any way by saying that here it is a picture. Committed as a church to helping places where the people and the ground have no gladness.

With that in mind, something very strange about what is happening here in Joel. Very odd about his message. No one except Joel seems to be that bothered.

Yet no one cares.

Apparently there are some people who have so numbed the pain with alcohol that they have slept through this

mass devastation. The national tragedy that everyone is facing seems to have passed them by, lying asleep in the street. In fact the only methodology Joel feels able to use to get them to take it seriously is to tell them there will be no more drinks. Self absorbed they are!

National tragedy beyond that ever seen, lying drunk in street. Got some nerve! Only thing that will wake them up is to hear that the good times for them may be over.

Similar in verse 8: surprise that a nation facing this type of disaster needs to be told to have a time of national mourning, yet Joel does need to tell them.

While the priests, the people who are supposed to be able to put things right with God, are at least mourning in verse 9 it seems to be because they can't get on with their work – and basically Joel has to tell them again (13) to get back to the temple and take the whole issue a lot more seriously.

Strangest of all perhaps is the farmers, told to despair and weep and wail. Few years ago when serious flooding in agricultural England, crops destroyed, no one needed to tell the farmers to mourn over their destroyed crops. Heartbreaking pictures, farmers standing knee deep in mud in what had been, a few days before, a field of golden wheat.

I guess it is of some debate about whether those particular floods were caused by man made climate change. Science seems to agree that man made climate change is effecting us all in some way. Denies that written off as a total loon.

While that is scientific orthodoxy, interesting to observe climate change negotiations a last year. Industrialised nations, western nations not keen to reduce carbon emissions. Effect on world's poor, justifying that other nations with twice the population emit more – yes because twice the populations. Ruin our economy. Mean? People will not be able to have the lifestyle and consumer goods they want. All scientists are agreed that the earth is mourning over this.

If a Christian, believe the earth is a Gift from god, because of our failure to exhibit fruit God requires, love and concern for others more than ourselves on global scale earth is quite literally mourning our failure. Sleepwalking into it – almost like lying drunk in street, only wake up when it stops me getting what I want.

Picture of God in the Bible is that he is real, creator, and he is endlessly committed to self giving love, planted in him,

rooted in him, grow out from him that is the fruit we display – loving the people round us more than we love ourselves.

So I can't just blame politicians for their failure in Denmark – problem is that they are responsible to people who don't love like that. People sleeping through mess their actions have created, only roused when it effects them.

Not some distant problem.

Cultural mantra – “you can do anything you want”. Not true, basis of it: what you want is the thing that really matters. Of course a successful human being someone who loves, but I want not to, get stuff for myself. I want what I want.

I have got to do what's right for me is a line coming from the problem pages of left leaning newspapers (I 'm bored in my marriage what should I do) right through to being in the lyrics of High School Musical. No room to sneer at selfish politicians. Way I live too.

New morality to salve our consciences: Tolerance – become a cardinal virtue.

Translates: Don't love or care for people other than myself, I put up with them, I tolerate them.

Wonder why, like in Joel's time, social fabric breaking down, replaced fruit of self giving love, satisfied with weed of tolerance.

Fields are dry. Society where true gladness gets further and further away despite spending more and more on our entertainment. Self righteous about being tolerant whilst actually being selfish.

If there is a God out there of ultimate self giving love, then really, what do we have to offer him? In Joel terms, picking up dead dust holding it up, very pleased with this. Don't do the fruit of self giving relational committed love, but have our tolerance.

I'm also not espousing a Daily Mail inspired ranting where people like Christians sit back and view the world as if it is all evil out there.

Fact is that where it is claimed the real self giving God is known, the fruitlessness is often just as real. We operate just the same way as if I matter more than other people, not to a genuine Christian God-like ethic, which says other people matter more than me. Only we give the illusion

that God must be very pleased with our offerings. Not a Christian, not saying we are sorted and you haven't.

Christians whose gladness has dried up. Because we are making bad choices based on what we want, more stuff, more being liked and respected, more security, and then, like the people in Joel's time, numbing the pain and sleeping through it. Miles away from the fruit that will last Jesus talks about – our lives leading to other people want to know God – why would they if the fruit, lack of it, is just the same.

Joel is saying – wake up. The clues are everywhere that this is not how people were meant to be, real famine of the real fruit and it is a problem between us and God. If that is where you are, despair of that path. Pick up the clues, not just the way the world is - there is something wrong. Christian life is unfruitful, does not result in giving of yourself for sake of others and the drawing of other people to God, still a religious version of you deciding to do what you want, for goodness sake. Wake Up – means there is a real problem.

However, if you do wake up, it could still go horribly wrong.

I guess the people in Joel's day could have gone back out into the field and started beating the ground harder, trying to muster up something they could give to God. Make fruit, make fruit.

Clear: situation was too dire for that. And it is for us too. Definitely not saying that we all need to try and be better people so that we can offer something to God. Truth is, it's too late. We have already spoiled what God has given, truth is we have nothing to offer to make it better. Going out, beating the ground trying to get fruit to give God is not what Joel suggests.

No, what he Joel commands: turn back to God and say we need your help. (Read verse 14)

Have you had this question? – if God is God, why did he send this plague of locusts in the first place? Why put the people in a place where they have nothing to offer him, if that's so bad?

Why – because the God we see in the Bible, God who is so filled with self giving love eventually came to our world in the person of Jesus. **Because he is love he doesn't want our stuff, he wants us.** He doesn't want us to give him things, he wants us to come to him, to know him to seek his help, relate to him.

The clues that there is a problem, not so that we will beat the dry ground trying to find something he will take.

God is saying, problem is that you ignore me, if I have to make it so that you really have absolutely nothing to give to make you see that, forced to relate to me just for help, then that is what I will do, because he wants you back to know him.

Great news is that through Jesus we can come to God, return to him, seek his help, and know that we will get it. Give up trying to offer me stuff, you can't. Trust Jesus – rely on him, come to me, Jesus says and let me know you as you ask for my help and my undeserved love. God doesn't want you to try harder, wants you to totally replant your life in him –trusting him, knowing him the basis of what you do.

Even true, if call yourself a Christian already, but aware that the field is dry and the land is fruitless – whipping up more obedience is not what God wants, but for you to come back to Jesus, seek, love and experience his kindness, his mercy. It is those people who remain in Jesus, always trusting him, who bear the fruit that lasts.

Once some people organised an event and asked me to talking to some people who weren't Christians. Difference between Christianity and other religions – other religions say things you can do for God which will please him. Great news of Christianity God not asking you to do anything to impress him at all – he has done everything we need for us to come to him, wants us to ask for his help the way we are. Good news, amazing news. "I prefer other religions, prefer the idea God will be pleased by what I do." Too proud for Christianity.

Can I urge you, if you see the fruitlessness, can I ask you, please, don't be proud - cry out to the Lord. Pray to him, come back to him by trusting what he does for us through Jesus. Please, wake up, ask God for his kindness.