

Year B Harvest Festival, 29 September 2024

Joel 2: 21-27, Philippians 4: 4-9, John 6: 25-35

The book of Joel only makes an appearance in our readings on a Sunday once every three years. And this is the Sunday, Harvest Festival in Year B. Joel is one of the later minor prophets, writing in the 700's, at a time when there was an invasion of locusts, reminding the people of previous invasions by foreign armies. Joel's prophecy is that after the time of locusts will come a time of abundance, with plentiful rain in the right seasons, pastures will be verdant, plentiful grain will be harvested, and the olive harvest will produce more oil than the storage vats can contain. A picture of abundance that will show God is faithful to his people and God can do great things.

We all know that in Bible stories locusts were bad news. In favourable conditions, for locusts that is, their population could rapidly swell and a vast cloud of locusts could strip a vast area of all fodder and food growing for human consumption in very little time at all. This would lead to a time of famine for the people.

However, there are stories in recent years which paint a different picture. People whose land has become barren with year after year of unrelenting drought, have been forced to leave their lands and move to large-tented communities close to international relief efforts run by the UN. Sadly, the people there welcome the locusts when they come through the camps. They are a rich source of protein for the people on meagre and often unreliable rations.

I am sure Joel never envisaged that locusts would be a welcome source of protein. Such is the damage humankind has already done to God's most amazing and beautiful creation.

We have just sung 'We plough the fields and scatter', a hymn that has been sung in churches for about the last 140 years¹. You will note that the version we sang included an additional verse, not in the original. But I will argue that we should also be changing the first verse. The scientific community is of more or less one mind that ploughing is not good for the soil or for the environment.

¹ It was written in 1782 in German and set to music in 1800. It is based on Psalm 144. It originally had 17 verses. It was translated to English in 1861. The hymn as we know it starts with the 3rd verse of the original.

It is worth noting that in 1969, Sir John Betjeman parodied the hymn as "We spray the fields and scatter/the poison on the land".

Anyway, back to the soil and the environment. Knowledge of soil science has advanced considerably in the last 40 years. Ploughing and disturbing soil is now known to reduce its fertility. 'No dig' methods recognize that micro- and macro-biotic organisms constitute a sort of 'food web' community in the soil, necessary for the healthy cycling of nutrients and prevention of problematic organisms and diseases. The plants transfer a portion of the carbon energy they produce to the soil, and microbes that benefit from this energy in turn convert available organic substances in the soil to the mineral components the plants need to thrive.

Ploughing on thin soils leads to dust bowls and desertification, ploughing on deeper soils may break up some weeds but also ploughs in seeds of weeds into the soil. Ploughing also uses a lot of energy.

The field above the Rectory has not been ploughing for a quite a few years, and with a suitable rotation of crops seems to be doing quite well.

We also now know that the intensive use of fertilisers and herbicide and insecticide sprays are harmful to the environment. Fertilisers leech into water courses and poison our rivers and seas, and the energy required to make these fertilisers is also considerable. Many farmers have now realised they can make a profit by farming using far less intensive farming methods, ending their reliance on 'big agri' to grow healthy crops and maintain healthy soils.

God has given us freewill and the amazing intellectual abilities to better understand how to grow food without destroying the soil and poisoning God's creation.

Maybe a modern-day prophet can re-write the Book of Joel, looking forward to the day when the land will be provide an abundance of food for all people in the world, where the unsustainable and intensive farming methods of the 20th century are viewed in the same way as the locusts were in Joel's day. And also where the damaging effects of climate change have started to be reversed through the dedicated and persistent actions of all the nations that inhabit this most amazing and beautiful example of the power of our God.

Our gospel reading mentions food a lot, but its key message is that we are to believe in the one God sent, the true bread from heaven. Jesus declared, 'I am

the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

In this time of drought, floods and forest fires, where people have gone hungry and thirsty how are we to receive this passage? In this time of financial hardship for many, who struggle to afford to feed their families and heat their homes each winter, how are we to receive this passage? It clearly isn't about actual food, but is about spiritual food, about receiving Jesus into our lives and being nourished by his teachings and by following his ways. To read that passage to someone in danger of dying of hunger or thirst because of climate change, or to someone needing to use a food bank is not going to be anything other than a total misunderstanding of its meaning.

As we are nourished by reading scripture and continually developing our relationship with God and doing our best to follow the ways of Jesus, we are called to make a difference, where we are, now.

Today it is by supporting our appeal for Harvest Festival, to provide funds for the project at St Catherine's in Tollcross to provide food, some fellowship and a chance of a shower and clean clothes. And after today our focus changes to providing tea, coffee, and hot chocolate for the Peeblesshire Youth Trust, so they can make up 125 hampers to support families in need over Christmas. And every day, it is by following the teaching of Jesus, and seeking to be a good neighbour, to all, across the world impacted by our greenhouse gas emissions.

Joel was clear that renewing nature was crucially important to the survival and future of the people. This is a message we each need to hear today. In addition, Joel made clear that as people of faith we are to have hope; not a warm sense of positiveness and optimism, but a hope that leads each person to take some form of action, knowing that when multiplied by so many people, it can make a much bigger impact.

Our epistle sums up the exhortations within the other two readings; as people of faith we are to act and pray to God, and we are to put our faith into practice, doing true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable deeds. Deeds that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable in the eyes of our God. And that is why we end our services each Sunday with a commission; to go in peace to love and serve our Lord in the name of Christ.