

Prophets

Part 2, Joel 2:12-17; 28-32

¹² “Even now,” declares the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and
mourning.”

¹³ Rend your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.

¹⁴ Who knows? He may turn and relent
and leave behind a blessing—
grain offerings and drink offerings
for the LORD your God.

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion,
declare a holy fast,
call a sacred assembly.

¹⁶ Gather the people,
consecrate the assembly;
bring together the elders,
gather the children,
those nursing at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room
and the bride her chamber.

¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister before the
LORD,
weep between the portico and the altar.
Let them say, “Spare your people, LORD.

Do not make your inheritance an object
of scorn,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
‘Where is their God?’”

The Day of the LORD

²⁸ “And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.

²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and
women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

³⁰ I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

³¹ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and
dreadful day of the LORD.

³² And everyone who calls
on the name of the LORD will be saved;
for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there will be deliverance,
as the LORD has said,
even among the survivors
whom the LORD calls.

In the 70s and 80s in Romania the government made some radical decisions. Their birth-rates were declining so they instituted a policy to increase the population: they banned abortion, taxed childless people, lowered the marriage age to 15. Then babies started to increase so the government decided that they would raise the babies better than mothers. So they went around collecting the babies from mothers until they had around 170,000 babies in their care.

The conditions were cramped, the babies were left in cots all day. They weren't picked up; if they cried, no one would respond, so they eventually stopped crying – a western doctor commented on how silent it was in the babies' room.

Because of these conditions the mortality rate jumped, so did the mental health problems, developmental problems – all because they weren't picked up, held or loved.

This traumatic event for the Romanian babies shaped the rest of their lives.

During the period of the prophets, God puts his children through a traumatic event and one of the questions is how will they recover from the Exile? What will become of Israel on the other side? Because it had real potential to kill off Judaism.

It's hard to fathom how difficult it was for Israel to get its head around the Exile. Their theology was strongly tied into location – God's people in the promised land. The land which God had won for them from the Cannanites. The land where God had made his dwelling on earth in the temple. The whole history of the Hebrew people is built on the promises of God to keep and protect his people, and through them see his purposes for the world fulfilled.

But now that the holy city lies in ruin, the temple is destroyed, what does this mean for their faith? Was their faith miss placed in Yahweh or has Yahweh abandoned them? The exile was earth shattering for the common Jew, what they believed about God seems false.

But Joel puts the Exile into a different context.

Joel, a small book (only 3 chapters long) but it really punches above its weight. Peter quotes Joel at Pentecost, Paul quotes him in Romans. This little prophetic writing, sets the events of the exile in a different light and help us to see what God has planned for Israel by sending them off into exile.

The Exile was a long time coming for Israel. They had gone through a long period of division and upheaval. Israel splits in two after king Solomon dies, north and south. The north and Syria start to team up against the south, civil war is about to start then Assyria comes and wipes out the north, but leaves the south untouched. Babylon then wipes out the Assyrians and swallows up the south as well, taking three waves of exile to Babylon. Persia then rises to power and wipes out the Babylonians and under the Persians the Israelites are sent home.

Then under the Persian king Cyrus the Jews are allowed to return and given the resources to rebuild. Joel is written somewhere around the return to Israel.

So Joel sees the events of the Exile with a longer perspective. That what is happening in this experience of exile has implication from the past and for the future. It's not just about the people of Israel in the present time but the fulfilment of the prophecy reaches far into the future.

Consider verses 12-13 "Rend your hearts not your garments". An ancient form of grieving is to tear your clothes, to wear sack cloth, that all may publicly see your grief. But God doesn't care about a public display of grief. He doesn't care about a display of grief – about acting like you repent.

Tear you hearts not your clothes ... the repentance God is interested in is the repentance of the heart. Earnest repentance is what God is about.

Even in the Old Testament Joel sees that God is not a God of Law, but real faith. He is not a God that want his people to go through the motions, to obey the rules but He is a God of relationship. Joel speaks of him in relational terms – gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. This is possibly an early creed used by the Jews about the nature of God.

Joel says all that has happened – the exile, the return, the rebuilding – is all about God being in relationship with his people.

Joel sees that this is what he wants for his people now and in days to come. Israel had made their religion an institution, while God wanted a relationship.

I thought about it a bit this week – relational vs institutional, what is the church today? Which one better describes how we practise our faith, how we **ARE** church? And what does the Bible say about how we are to understand our faith?

The New Testament gives us a big range of different images to understand church, that the church is like:

- vine and branches – John 15:5
- Bride/groom – John 3:29 Matthew 25:1
- Flock – John 10:11, John 21:5
- City – Revelations 21
- Body – 1 Corinthians 12
- Building/temple – 1 Corinthians 3:9; 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17;
- People/priesthood – 1 Peter 2:9

We are given this real diversity of images about the church, but what can we take from all these images, how are we to understand the faith?

Largely, if you try to characterise all the images, Jesus gives us shepherd/flock, vine/branches, bride/groom – these are all relational images.

The apostles give us building/people/city/body – institutional images, (except for body).

When it comes to faith Jesus explains it as relationship: as a shepherd tend his flock; as branches growing from a vine; as a bride and groom. All these images are the extremely intimate, organic, natural.

While the apostles introduce the idea of institution: city, nation, people. Building images about working together, strength in unity but not organic and natural, but regimented and ordered.

It occurs to me so often we introduce the institution, while God just wants the relational.

What does he say to Israel? Rend your heart ... not your clothes.

God doesn't want national reform, he doesn't want Israel to change its policies or adjust its laws, he wants them to return their heart to him.

He goes on verses 28-29: this is the prophecy for God's ultimate relational act with mankind. When he pours out his spirit on his people. When he makes his home in their hearts this is now where God dwells. Not in a temple, not in an institution, but in his people.

To all those who open their hearts to his presence, God will pour himself in.

Next week is Pentecost, Peter understood the event of Pentecost through the prophecies of Joel.

In Acts 2, as everyone is struck by the spirit and speaking in tongues, Peter says:

¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

And he recites Joel 2:28-32 where Joel speaks of what happens

²⁸ "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. ²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. ³⁰ I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ³¹ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. ³² And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.

Harry Harlow was a scientist in the early 20th century who created a series of experiments that revolutionised the science about love. He did many experiments with baby monkey, like this one:

He had 2 monkey mothers, one made of wire the other of cloth. The wire mother fed the baby but the cloth offered nothing. But every day when they put the baby in the cage, it would go to the wire mother to feed then cling to the cloth mother for the next 12 hours. The wire mother gave him food, the cloth mother gave him something more important – relationship. Somehow comfort and love is more important than even food. These experiment were later labelled by one journalist: "cloth mother, the psychological study into the obvious". And here's the conclusion – we are people of relationship and this is all God want from us, more than obedience, more than sacrifice, dedication.

God sent Israel into exile, because he had already lost them, and he wanted them back. Not back as his nation – as an institution – but back in relationship with him.

Being his people is not about your nationality, or rule or membership. It's about relationship, it's about the heart. What the Exile is about is the salvation of his people. God send his people out in exile, so he might win them back in relationship

Is your faith a relationship with God or is a club you're a member of? Is it about being draw closer into the presence of God?

God gives us what we need, and what we need is relationship. Without it we are dysfunctional, we are damaged and God knows this Christianity is now the just box you tick on the Census. But it can be like a bride and a groom, a vine and a branch, a flock and a shepherd.