

A WOUNDED SAVIOUR FOR A WOUNDED PEOPLE**Sermon for Ash Wednesday 2022****Joel 2:12-19**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon tonight is our First Reading we just heard read, Joel 2:12-19: ¹² **“Nevertheless, even now,” declares the LORD, “return to Me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning! ¹³ Tear your hearts and not your clothes!”**

Return to the LORD, your God! For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in mercy and relents from sending calamity. ¹⁴ Who knows whether He may turn back, relent and leave a blessing behind Him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the LORD, your God? ¹⁵ Blow a trumpet in Zion! Announce a holy fast! Call an assembly! ¹⁶ Gather the people! Consecrate the congregation! Assemble the aged people! Gather the children, even the breast-fed infants! Let the bridegroom leave his bedroom, and let the bride leave her bridal chamber! ¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, weep between the Temple-porch and the altar! Let them say, “Look compassionately on Your people, O LORD! Do not make Your inheritance a disgrace and a byword among the nations! Why should people ask among the nations, ‘Where is their God?’” ¹⁸ Then the LORD became deeply devoted to His land and took pity on His people. ¹⁹ The LORD answered His people: “Look! I am sending you grain, new wine and olive-oil. They will satisfy you. I shall not make you an object of scorn among the nations any longer.”

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Lent is a penitential season. It is a time for us to consider again how deep our need for a Saviour is, and, recalling our sins and the great price they demanded, we should take the time not only to ponder this *but to sincerely repent*. Actually, Luther writes in the first of his 95 Theses, *“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Matt. 4:17), He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”* Daily we need to repent of our sins.

The book of the prophet Joel is generally believed to have been written between the time of the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the final destruction of Jerusalem - in other words, between 721 B.C. and 585 B.C. The people in Joel’s day were frightened, so Joel called on them to repent in order that, possibly, God would relent from their troubles and they would find peace and prosperity again.

Scholars believe that among the problems the prophet Joel was facing was a famine caused by a swarm of locusts and drought and wildfires as a result. Judah was no longer the great and glorious kingdom but a small, relatively insignificant nation on the world scene, beset by neighbouring countries and their expansionist plans, with a struggling economy at home.

Remarkably, Joel begins this section of his text with an appeal from God and an offer of blessings. He writes, **“Nevertheless, even now,” declares the LORD, “return to Me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning! ¹³ Tear your hearts and not your clothes!”** The implied promise is that if they humble themselves and repent sincerely - if they tear their hearts and not just their clothes - that God will relent and turn from the troubles they have been experiencing and bless them with good. So Joel writes, **“Return to the LORD, your God! For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in mercy and relents from sending calamity.”** These are the same terms the covenant LORD had used to describe Himself when He had passed before Moses on Mount Sinai.¹ Then also, the Lord was dealing with a disobedient people. The Israelites had forgotten Him and His deliverance from Egypt in favour of the pleasures of worshipping a golden calf. Yet Israel’s Lord remained ready to welcome sinners home again.

Joel also gives a detailed description of what true repentance might look like. He calls the people to **“Announce a holy fast!”** He was not asking them to starve in the midst of famine but to set aside the food they do have for a time

¹ Exodus 34:6-7

and show the depth of the sincerity of their repentance. He calls for people of every age - he mentions the “**aged people**,” even “**breast-fed infants**.” He summons people *in all stages of life* to set aside their daily routines and the seemingly important things of their lives to return to their God, calling even the bridegroom from his wedding preparations and the bride from her bridal chamber to come out and humble themselves and repent, and call upon the Lord for mercy. The priests were told to “**weep between the Temple-porch and the altar!**” Joel leads the priests to pray, “**Look compassionately on Your people, O LORD! Do not make Your inheritance a disgrace and a byword among the nations**” - *these descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with whom You had made Your everlasting gospel covenant*. The priests’ prayer, like the prayer of Moses, appealed to the honour of God as if to say, “*Don’t let the heathen scorn Your people and make fun of you, Israel’s God. The heathen may say that You have abandoned Israel or that You were too busy elsewhere to protect Your chosen people. Spare us, and don’t let the heathen talk that way about You.*”

If Joel was living today, his call to us would be exactly the same: *set aside the ordinary business of life and repent!* While he may focus on other things, and there are literally dozens of things that crowd our lives and slowly squeeze time for worship, Bible study and prayer out of our days, nevertheless, he would call us to gather and repent, that we, too, may see days of blessings and abundance again.

Except, our relationship with God is not a national covenant, and we ought not to be dealing with God for merely *external goods*. We have all things in abundance, like no other time in history. Sure, when we look back at our past, there has been tough times and lots of struggles, yet we kept marching on. People kept their noses above water, even when the economy slipped in and out of recession and interest rates were in double figures. They still got by, and people were more optimistic. However, when past times were good and when the economy was doing well, when the seasons were fantastic, and everyone was delighting in their blessings, did they stop to give thanks as they surely ought to? Or were they too busy taking the abundance as permission to accumulate more toys and fancy clothes, and so on? To tear down barns and build bigger ones? How many received blessings in abundance but did not use them to serve the Lord more fully or help his less fortunate brother out? No, I am sure that in our own lives past, we have often seen many take their abundance as nothing more than to be spent on their own pleasures. Such people have lived like kings - better than most kings in human history - and dreamed that it would go on for the rest of their lives.

Today things look a bit spooky. A worldwide pandemic has caused much grief. The rise of China is scary. Who knows what will come of the fighting in Ukraine? It seems as though gloom is beginning to dominate people’s psyche. For most of us, though, things haven’t really changed - except our mood. But we are aware that we depend on God’s blessings, or else things go bad really fast. Just as He did through Joel, God calls us to repent. We need to set aside the ordinary things in life and take time to confess our sins, and ask God for forgiveness and blessing.

Chief of all the blessings we need is faith. We need to remember the One who was prophesied, the wounded One who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our wrongdoings.² He bore our sins on the cross to rescue us, not from bad economies or from any gloomy prospects we may have of the future of Australia, but from our sins and from the condemnation we have so richly deserved. We don’t have to wait and wonder, as did the people of the time of Joel, to see if God will turn and bless us. He has done it already! He has forgiven us by the death and resurrection of Jesus and has filled us with the hope of resurrection from our graves and of life everlasting with Him in glory.

Whatever the future of our nation is, we have the final and ultimate questions answered already. If God grants us a good life, we shall celebrate abundance in this life, thanking Him daily for it, but even if He does not, we can celebrate forgiveness, life, and salvation! As Job once declared, “*Look! Blessed is the human being whom God corrects! Do not despise the discipline of the Almighty!*”¹⁸ *For, although He wounds, He will bandage. Although He causes injury, His hands will heal*” (Joel 5:17-18).

We are the wounded people in need of the wounded Saviour. The difference between Him and us, however, is that our wounds are self-inflicted, and although He bore them willingly, His wounds are ours. “*Surely, He has taken on Himself our sufferings and carried our sorrows*” (Is. 53:4).

The hope of the people in Joel’s time was that God would return prosperity and abundance to them. Our hope is that He will sustain us in faith, forgive us our sins, and count us worthy for Christ’s sake to be His holy people and serve

² Isaiah 53:4-5

Him here in time and there in eternity. We know that He returned to bless them back then, and we can be confident that He will bless us now, for Christ's sake. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

O God our heavenly Father, who loved the world so much that You gave Your only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but have eternal life, we thank You for His holy life on earth, for His precious suffering and death, and for His glorious victory over sin and evil. Give us a living faith in Him, and a share in the life He has obtained for us.

We pray for the holy Church throughout the world, and especially for the churches linked to us in the fellowship of faith and life. We pray for the ministers of Your Word and Sacraments, and especially for our own pastor. We pray for the rulers of the nations, and especially for the rulers of our Commonwealth and State. Grant that all in positions of power and responsibility may carry out their tasks in the light of Your will, and promote the true welfare of the community and of all mankind, always remembering that they must finally stand before Christ to be judged by Him.

We pray for all Christian people, that they may live in faith and in reverence for You, in humble obedience to You, and in brotherly love to one another. We plead for all who desire or have need of our prayers: the sick, the sorrowing, the lonely, the downcast, and the bereaved. Give them those gifts both of body and of soul that will be for their present and eternal good.

We pray for ourselves, that in Your mercy these holy days of Lent may help us to see and grasp anew all that our Lord has done for us and for our eternal salvation. We grieve over our sinfulness, and seek Your forgiveness and grace. Grant that we may always rejoice in Your love and find strength for life's way, so that we may with patience face every trial, with perseverance run the race You set before us, and at last taste the peace of our Lord's victory in the rest that He has prepared for all who love Him.

We praise You for all who have departed this life in the faith of Christ, and pray that we may share with them in the glorious resurrection to everlasting life.

All these things we humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour, who humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. And to You, O Father, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, be glory and praise for ever. Amen.

ASH WEDNESDAY

Joel 2:12-19

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2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

^{20b} We implore you on Christ's behalf: "Be reconciled to God!" ²¹ God made Him who did not know sin to be sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1} As men who are working with God, we also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For He says: "At a favourable time I have heard you and on the day of salvation I have helped you." Look! Now is the favourable time. Look! Now is the day of salvation.

³ We do not lay any kind of obstacle, to avoid discredit on our ministry. ⁴ Rather, in everything we commend ourselves as the ministers of God: in great endurance, in troubles, in calamities, in difficulties; ⁵ in beatings, in imprisonments, in riots; in hard work, in sleepless nights, in hunger; ⁶ in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in sincere love, ⁷ in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness on the right hand and on the left; ⁸ through glory and dishonour, through bad report and good report; as deceivers and yet true; ⁹ as unknown and yet well known; as dying and, you see, we go on living; as chastened and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as made sad but always rejoicing; as beggars but making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing everything. ¹¹ O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you. Our hearts have opened wide. ¹² We are not being narrow in our feelings for you, but you are being narrow in your hearts toward us. ¹³ Treat me as I am treating you! I am speaking to you as my children. You, too, should open your hearts wide!

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

¹ “Be careful not to perform your righteous deeds before other people, to be seen by them! If you do, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² Therefore, when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be praised by other people! Truly, I tell you, they have their reward in full.

³ “When you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ that your giving may be in secret! Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

⁵ “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites! For they love to stand praying in synagogues and on the street corners, to be seen by other people. Truly, I tell you, they have their reward in full. ⁶ However, when you pray, go into your room, shut your door and pray to your Father, who is in secret! Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you...

¹⁶ “When you fast, stop looking sombre, like the hypocrites! For they neglect their appearance, that they may appear to people to be fasting. Truly, I tell you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ However, when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that you may not appear to other people to be fasting, except to your Father, who is in secret! Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

¹⁹ “Stop storing up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal! ²⁰ Rather, keep storing up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal! ²¹ For your heart will also be where your treasure is.