

Date: 13.4.08
Text: Joel 3
Place: Kingscliff / Tweed heads am/pm
Title: Fear God!
File: Joel 3

Introduction

How will history judge this nation when some time in the future it looks back at our performance in the early years of the 21st century? Will they applaud the economic prosperity of the Howard years as a boom time for all concerned? Or will they say that in the goal of becoming richer we helped destroy the planet so in the end we became poorer?

Will it look back at the decision by the Federal parliament to say sorry to our indigenous Australians as a water shed in how we treated our Aboriginal brothers and sisters or instead will it say it was just words and did nothing to promote practical reconciliation? Will it judge that we finally threw off the shackles of the past and came forward mature and confident as a nation or will it say that we forgot our basic morals and so by allowing euthanasia, binge drinking, drugs, abortion, gay rights to take over our thinking, we lost the moral fabric of much of what our nation was built upon. I wonder how will history judge this nation when it looks back from the safety of the future?

But more importantly, how will God judge this nation when he comes again and opens the books on our foreign policy, on our morality, on our treatment of asylum seekers, on our foreign aid contribution to the poorest parts of the world? Will he be happy with what we have done? Will he think we could have done more? Will he think that we actually lost the plot in the way that we have behaved as Australians?

Or does God not really care about the nations, only individuals? Will he just judge our leaders for the decision that they personally made? Or are we complicit in their decisions? Because we live in a democratic nation do we somehow share the blame if our nation gets it wrong and do we enjoy the blessings if our nation gets it right?

Well Joel chapter 3 has some interesting things to say about these questions. For there the prophet Joel speaks on God's behalf about the great day of judgement that will happen at the end of the world. About the time when God will lay open all the books and bring justice to a world that is sick and tired of evil men and nations going to war, of trafficking young and old as slaves, of raping and plundering their neighbouring nations. Well they won't get away with it says Joel. For in verses 1 to 8 we hear that

1. God's Speaks. (v.1-8)

You see like a photographer, Joel has used a wide angle lens for his picture of the day of the Lord at the end of the chapter 2. But now he zooms in for a closer look of this day of judgement and grace. For God speaks and tells us what will happen on that last day.

He will gather the nations together in the valley of Jehoshaphat, in the valley of decision, he says in verse 2. And he will go through them one by one, Tyre, Sidon,

Philistia, Greeks, Sabeans and explain what they have done wrong as a nation and so what their judgement will be.

On that last day, on that great and mighty day of judgement, it is not just individuals that will be judged, the nations will be judged as well. And they will be judged for what they did on an international stage as well as what they did domestically. And it seems they will especially be judged as to how they treated God's people.

Did you notice that? Verse 2, *then I will enter my into judgement against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land. They cast lots for my people and traded boys for prostitutes, they sold girls for wine that they might drink.* V 5 *“You took my silver and my gold and carried off my finest treasures to your temple. You sold the people of Judah & Jerusalem to the Greeks that you might send them far from their homeland.*

God so identifies himself with his people, that if we treat them badly, it is like we treat Him badly. God is so present with his people that if we attack them, we attack God. God is so tied up with his people, that if you mistreat them, you mistreat Him as well.

Now in the OT, God's people was the nation of Israel. He chose them out of all the nations of the world to be his holy possession. And so if you attacked Israel and mistreated Israel, you were also attacking God. And one of the reasons that successive Presidents of the US have supported the modern nation of Israel in recent times is that many Americans still believe that applies today. Israel is still God's people and so they will be allies with Israel no matter what they do or how they behave.

But with the coming of Jesus, the NT says that God's people are not confined to the nation of Israel, for on the last day God's people will be made up of individuals from every tribe, every language, every people group in the whole world. And so it is not that difficult to apply this passage to those countries like Communist Russia and China, or Muslim dominated nations like Indonesia, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt who attack the Church today, because they want to defeat the Christian God.

But it is more than that. For any sin is a sin against God. Every act of inhumanity is an assault against the one who made humans. Any immorality is an act of defiance against the one who gave us our moral code. Any sin does not just hurt the one we sin against, but hurts the one who made them, their Creator God. So that is why God can say to the Saul on the Damascus Road, *why are you persecuting me?* Saul was not just persecuting the Christians but their God as well.

So what sin have the nations, and if you read between the lines it is not just the nations around Israel, but Israel themselves, what sin have the nations committed that God will judge on the last day?

Removing people from their homeland, verse 2. Trading people as commodities instead of treating them as human beings, verse 3. Prostitution verse 3. Slavery. Verse 3. Plundering the land of all its wealth, verse 5. Taking what belonged to God and using it for themselves, verse 5. Violence, verse 19. Shedding innocent blood, verse 19. And the catch all phrase, Wickedness, verse 13.

Things done in secret and things done in the full light of day have been seen by God. Things done in the past and things done in the present have been noted done by God. Things done by the powerful nations who can normally get away with it and those things done by the weaker nations who normally can't get away with it, will all be brought to judgement, says the Lord.

God is serious about justice. God will not let the big wigs get away with things. God will bring everyone together on the plain of decision and he will decide whether we have been fair, whether we have been just, whether we have treated others properly.

I wonder what he will say about us? Did you read in the paper a couple of weeks ago about the mining community in NT where 12 and 13 year old girls were being given drugs and alcohol in return for sex? Have you been watching the violence against one another on Underbelly, depicting the drug wars in Melbourne between 1995 and 2004? Have you followed the debate about the huge number of abortions currently in our country? How we have been treating those Asylum seekers in our detention centres? The rise in the prevalence of prostitution in our land, of gambling, of binge drinking, of domestic violence. How DOCs is being run off its feet in trying to react to the way we treat our kids. And this is happening in our country and we are one of the best countries in the world aren't we? We don't have the corruption, the war mongering, the drug trade, the slavery, the genocide, the human rights abuses that other countries have, do we?

Friends this is happening on our watch. This is happening right now in our country, in our world. And sure you and I might not be in the thick of it, but our nation can either add to the miseries of people or help relieve it. As someone once said, *"All it takes for evil to increase is for good men to do nothing."*

In Joel chapter 3, God is speaking to us and saying, in the end justice will be done. In the end I will gather the nations together and in verses 9 to 15 we see that

2. The Lord Judges.

He doesn't just speak, he will one day step in and do something about it. So what does he do? Well he calls the nations together, as if they were gathering for war. He encourages them to bring their weapons, to even turn ploughs into swords, their pruning hooks into spears. There they are, nation side by nation, with all their numbers, their weapons, their military might on show.

It is like it is the last battle. Armageddon. The final showdown to see who is the strongest. Who is top dog. And who will be the biggest loser.

But then, there is no war, no fighting, no conflict. Because God shows up. And the military might of the world seems insignificant. God appears and the mightiest warriors quake in fear. God sits down and judges the nations and finally, finally justice is done.

The Lord Judges. And that judgement will involve everyone from the warrior, to the

farmer, to the weakling. The Lord Judges and the way they have treated others, God will treat them. The Lord judges and it will not be based on ignorance but on knowledge. God knows not just what the nations have done, but why they have done it. Whether they have been self centred, power hungry, racist, greedy, self indulgent.

The Lord judges and when he judges, the results will be decisive. Here in the valley of decision , the final decisions will be made. We have made our decisions, as individuals and nations during our life time. And on the last day God will make His decision as to what sort of life we have lived. And what sort of judgement we deserve.

Decisions. Former President Ronald Reagan learned the need for decision-making early in his life. A kindly aunt had taken him to a cobbler to have a pair of shoes custom-made for him. The shoemaker asked, "Do you want a round toe or a square toe?" Young Ronald hemmed and hawed, so the cobbler said, "Come back in a day or two and tell me what you want."

A few days later the cobbler saw young Reagan on the street and asked what he had decided about the shoes. "I haven't made up my mind," Reagan answered. "Very well," said the cobbler. "Your shoes will be ready tomorrow." When Reagan got the shoes, one had a round toe and the other a square one.

Said Reagan, "Looking at those shoes every day taught me a lesson. If you don't make your own decisions, somebody else makes them for you." And that is true for us and our nation. If we don't make a decision about how we are going to live our life, whether we are going to listen to God and live the way he wants us to live in his world, then someone else will make that decision for us. It might be our parents, our spouse, our boss at work, our mates. But if we don't choose to follow Jesus, they will most likely make that decision for us, that you won't follow Jesus.

And if we don't make a decision about how our nation will behave, then someone else will make that decision. Whether it be the politicians, the trade unions, the business council, the lobby groups. So we need to make a decision, because in the end God will judge us and our nation with justice.

So yes on that final day God alone will make the decision, but it will partly be based on the decisions that you and I make now. We will be on trial for our attitudes to God whether we listened to him or ignore him. Whether we loved him or were indifferent to Him. We will be judged on whether we accepted the grace he offered us in Christ or whether through our good works we treated to be good enough for him. We will be assessed on whether we treated people with respect, with dignity, with fairness, with justice, with love or whether we were selfish, self centred and greedy. From this point of view then, we are living in the valley of decision right now. So where do we stand - with God or against Him, for there is no middle ground.

Do you know, perhaps the most famous trials in history were known as the Nuremberg Trials, the trials of the Nazi war criminals of World War II. One of the masterminds of probably the worst of all concentration camps---Auschwitz---was Rudolf Hess. His trial was broadcast all over the world. During the trial, witness after witness came forward to the stand to relive the worst atrocities known to mankind. Witness after witness told of the brutality, the killings, the fear, the gas chambers, the

crematorium, and of Hess in the middle of it all.

As the trial came to a close, the day of justice had come. On the day of the reading of the verdict, Rudolf Hess entered the room, awaiting his fate. The crowd and the media grew silent. The verdict came: GUILTY! As the verdict was read, weeping could be heard from different locations in the room. Some were silently crying, others openly weeping and wailing.

As the courtroom emptied, a reporter stopped one of the witnesses. He asked, "I can understand the emotion you must be feeling at this moment. Is it because justice has finally been served? Is it because now there is finally an end to the horror and the pain? What are you feeling right now?" The man stopped and looked long into the eyes of the reporter, and as he wiped his face he replied, "it has nothing to do with any of those. I weep because as I stood there looking into his eyes, I saw myself."

Is that true of us today? Yes we see the faults, the injustice, the sin in the world. But we also see it in ourselves as well, and so we need know, that we need God's help, God's forgiveness, God's presence. Its not just about the nations, its about us as well.

3. The Lord speaks, the Lord judges and lastly **the Lord dwells**.

For the last day is not just about judgement and destruction. The book of Joel ends with the good news that on that day there will also be grace, mercy and forgiveness. Look at the second part of verse 16. *But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.*

Not everyone will be cast away from God's presence. Not everyone will feel the full force of God's judgement. God's people will find a refuge, a safe haven, a place to hide. In God Himself! Those who have made the decision to trust God. Those who have decided to trust in His Son Jesus. Those who have understood that when Jesus dies on the cross, he dies for the sins of the world and so if we have put our trust in Him then our sins, our violence, our wrongdoings have already been judged. For God's people, will find not judgement but protection. Not justice, but mercy. Not an eye for an eye, but a gracious Father.

God will live with them. God will dwell amongst them. God will be with his people. And when he does that three things will happen says Joel. In verses 17, he says they will become holy. They will be different. They will not continue to live in selfish, self centred ways, they will love others the way they love themselves. They will treat those that are made in God's image, those that they can see, in the same way that they treat a God whom they can't see.

God's people will be holy. Because the longer you live with someone the more you become like them. And the longer you live in God's presence, the more God's attitudes and God's goodness rubs off on you.

But God's people will not just be holy but satisfied. There will be times where the mountains will drip with new wine, the hills will flow with milk and water will gush everywhere. This is a sign of God's blessing. This is a sign of abundance. This is a way of God saying I will meet all your needs but not in a stingy, scabby sort of way.

No you will have all that you need and more.

And lastly you will be different from the nations. God will dwell in your midst. God will always be there for you. Now in a way we have had a taste of that promise coming true, without getting the whole hog. For with the coming of Jesus our sins have been forgiven and our lives have been pardoned. With the coming of the Spirit of God, in Acts chapter 2, God does live in our midst. He is accessible through prayer. God does meet our deepest needs. God does make us holy, because he no longer looks at us on our own. He looks at us in union with Christ.

But we don't have the blessings of super abundance. We don't have a complete lack of violence. The picture of prosperity and protection and God's full presence is not with us yet. That will only happen after that last day. When God comes in judgement and in grace.

So let me end with an illustration that might help to summarise all of this for us, and its about the game of hide and seek. When kids are young they love playing hide and seek, don't they, and they will do it for hours. But when we become older we often still play the game but in another form. We sometimes try and hide from God and some people spend a lifetime doing it.

But Joel is saying to us today, don't hide from God. He sees what you have done, what you are doing, he even knows what you will do. Don't hide from God, for one day he will open the books and judge what you have done and what your nation has done. Don't hide from God, hide in God.

Let God be your refuge. Let God be your protector and your provider. And don't hide from His Son Jesus, hide in His Son, Jesus. There you will find forgiveness, there you will find grace. There you will find holiness, abundance and mercy. So don't hide from God, hide in God!

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The purpose of God in the great locust plague that struck Israel in Joel's day and the purpose of God in the final day of the Lord are the same:

to make known that He alone is God and He alone is to be worshipped and served above all things

*****b

So many people are in the valley of decision. They think that since they own clocks they own time. Having a clock is one thing and keeping time is another.

*****c

Mrs. Emory S. Adams, Jr. said: "Recently my husband was faced with a decision affecting his career and our way of life as a family. Making the decision was agony, and when it was made we were still tormented by doubts.

"Then a dear friend passed on to us some words that had been given to her husband years ago by a former president of Bowdoin College. 'When a decision has been made and the die is cast, then,' said this wise gentleman, 'murder the alternatives.'"

*****d decision

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INTRO: Since 1947, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has depicted on its cover a Doomsday Clock

-The clock registers how close the world is to nuclear apocalypse, in the opinion of the editors

-They estimate it by placing the hands of the clock in relation to midnight

-On June 11, 1998 when India and Pakistan were menacing each other with nuclear tests, and the rest of the world failed to stop the spread of the weapons, the clock was moved forward 5 minutes, making it 9 minutes until 12.

-Only once since 1968 had the clock been moved so many minutes at once.

-There have been many books, movies, and TV shows that deal with the end of the

world

-During the time that my parents were growing up, along with fire drills at school, they had to practice what they would do in the event of a nuclear attack from the Soviet Union.

-At different times, such as September 11th, or the recent Tsunamis we have worried about our physical safety, and the threat of destruction.

-These threats are possibilities that might or might not happen in our lifetime, and might or might not happen at all.

-As Christians, though, we should be much more concerned about a day that God has promised is coming. It's not a matter of "If", it's a matter of "when".

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