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Where were you on September 11, 2001? I remember I was out visiting some of our parishioners and they all seemed to have their TV's on. And there was this sense of horror, of outrage, of dread, of vulnerability as I watched with a number of you those two planes crashing into the World Trade Centre, of the buildings coming down and then the endless discussions on what happened and how and why? I remember people saying that it was the day that changed the world.

It was really was one of those wake up calls for humanity. One of those incredible days of disaster that rock you to the core. A bit like the Bali bombings in 2002. The Tsunami in 2004 . And if you are older than me, you could probably add a few more national and international tragedies to that list. The outbreak of World War 1 or 2. The dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The Ash Wednesday bush fires. The earthquakes. The Cyclones. The Volcano Eruptions.

So what do you do when these tragedies strike? How should we respond? I remember for September 11 and the Bali Bombings, the response by our Prime Minister John Howard was a day of Mourning, a day of Prayer. Was that right? Is that appropriate? Is that what God would want us to do?

Well a long time ago the prophet Joel lives through a devastation that in a way was even more horrendous than each of these events. It was a plague of locusts. Locusts that came in by their billions and attacked the people of Israel with such ferociousness that it destroyed literally everything. And for Joel, these desperate times called for desperate measures. So lets look at what happened, what these desperate times were all about, before looking at the desperate measures put forward by Joel.

Now the biblical book of Joel is one of the 12 minor prophets. And we don't know much about Joel or when he prophesied. All we know is his name Joel, which means, means the Lord is God and his father's name Pethuel. We are not sure of when he lived or the actual circumstances of what happened and where. What we do know is that according to verse 2 he witnessed an event that was like no other in living memory and it all had to do with the coming of the locusts.

Now our first impression of a disaster caused by locusts is probably one of scoffing - how bad could it be? Surely this is nothing like a major bushfire or an earthquake, or even war itself. But in the Middle East a plague of locusts, a bad one would be much worse than any of these disasters. Apparently in 1889, there was one such plague that spread 3,000 kilometres over the Red Sea. It was calculated that it contained 24,420 billion locusts, weighing 42, 850 tons.

Now that sort of locust swarm could wreak untold havoc. Quite simply they eat everything and anything. All the crops, all the vines, the trees, the bark, the leaves, the flowers everything. They leave literally no food, no food whatsoever, as they get into the tiniest of spaces. But more than that they destroy this years crops. They eat all the seeds for next years crops and they can cause the trees so much stress that they might

destroy their crops for a number of years in the future. And in a cashless economy like that of Israel's, when the crops fail, people die in their thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands.

So according to verse 4 the locusts swarm in and eat and when they leave the great locusts eat what is left. Then the young locusts, have their go and if anything edible is left the other locusts well and truly finish everything off. So according to verse 5 there is no wine. Verse 7, no vines or trees. Verse 8 - 9 nothing to take to the temple for worship. Verse 11, no harvest. And according to verse 12, there is no joy. Now that's an understatement! This is the sort of nightmare scenario that even Alfred Hitchcock or Steven Spielberg might struggle to do justice with.

So what do you do when something apocalyptic like this happens? Well desperate times call for desperate measures, says Joel. But firstly you have to

1. Hear. Verses (2-4)

Verse 2. Hear this you elders, listen all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers?

Hear what God is saying. Listen to what is going on all around you, says Joel. Open your ears to the Word of the Lord. Before you open your mouth and complain. Before you begin to question God and ask him *Why?* Before you lament and cry and mourn, you must firstly hear, listen, pay attention. God might be saying something to you in the circumstances. God might be trying to tell you something. As CS Lewis once said *"God whispers in our pleasures, but he shouts in our suffering. For pain is God's megaphone to arouse a slumbering world."*

Now Joel is not saying that there is no time to mourn, to question, to cry, we will see that very soon. But that sort of emotion or emotionalism will, just like a series of waves, break over and over and over you. So before that strikes, one must listen. There are lessons to be learnt. These things that are happening are so important, that you will be telling them to your children and your grandchildren. So before you are completely engulfed in their waves, make sure you are open to listening to the word of the Lord.

Now in this circumstance, it is a message directed to the people through the prophet Joel. But in our circumstance, we are unlikely to hear a similar prophetic utterance. Instead, it is God's word in the Bible, that will give us words of challenge, and words of comfort. Words of hope and words of warning. Why this book in particular is here ready and waiting for your next disaster. As is the 23rd Psalm. Or the book of Job. Or Romans 8 or even the story of Joseph.

For in your distress, God does not leave you as orphans. He doesn't forget about you, he doesn't withdraw himself and remain silent. He speaks, if we have ears to hear. He points us toward the message of Jesus, the one who promises to bring good even out of evil for those who love God. So hear, but also

2. Wake Up. (verses 5-7)

“Wake up your drunkards and weep. Wail all you drinkers of wine, wail because the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips.” If you rely on wine, then there will be a day when the wine will fail you. If you rely on happiness, then one day you will wail. If you think that you don’t need God any more and can trust in your income, in your wealth, in your luxury items then wake up because one day they may all be taken away from you.

A disaster like a locust plague, like a September 11 or a Bali Bombing is like a slap across the face for a nation that is self indulgent. It is like a trumpet call warning of the battle ahead. It is like the wail of an ambulance, a fire engine, a police car, it grabs your attention, it forces you to concentrate. It open your eyes somewhat.

Or at least it should. Sept 11 meant that the war of terrorism begin. The Bali Bombings meant that most Australians wanted the terrorist to pay, even if it meant a reduction in our own civil liberties. The drought of the last couple of years meant that we finally got serious about the amount of water we were wasting in our suburban homes and it made the politicians want to finally do something about the Murray Darling Basin. It was a wake up call that woke us from our slumber. We suddenly realised we were more vulnerable that we first imagined.

You see we live in the Lucky Country. We have never had a world war fought on our soil. We have been spared the worst of the terrorist plots here in Australia. Even in the midst of drought we have plenty of food, nice clothes, why the new car market is booming. So it is easy for us Australians to believe that we don’t need God!

But yes we do! And so when the bottom drops out of the share market, when that car accident causes our loved one to live for now on in a wheel chair. When cancer strikes, when death comes knocking, when pain takes over all our body. These are wake up calls, reminding us that we are not in control of this world, God is. God has been good to us here in Australian, but that doesn’t mean that his protective hand will always be around us.

3. Listen! Wake Up! Mourn! (verses 8-12)

And so when these disasters strike, it is right and fitting to mourn. Mourn like a young engaged women who has just lost her fiancé. Mourn like the priests who now have no offerings to take to the Lord, because there is nothing left to give to Him. For when the fields are bare, when the grain is destroyed, when the wine has run out, when the joy of mankind is withered away and the bottom has fallen out of your world, of course it will take the wind out of your sails. It will lead to despair, tears, crying. Your heart will feel like its broken and your will to go on will disappear.

There is no use just trying to be strong and stoic. It does you no good to refuse to show any emotion. Its not a matter of being strong to help those suffering all around you. You need to find a way to express your emotions. To release the pressure valve from within. To mourn and to grieve, those things that mean so much to you that have now been taken away.

Now lets admit that Australian women are normally better at doing this than us men. They cry, we pass them the handkerchiefs. They sob, we keep a stiff upper lip. Other

cultures don't have the same trouble expressing their emotions, but we do. But there is a time to mourn just as there is a time to laugh. And we need to learn to laugh with those who laugh and mourn with those who mourn.

Can I just say on a personal note, I have cried more in the last 3 months, than the previous 40 years put together. Walking together with the Hills and the Blundells through their difficult times has been an emotional roller coaster. And I am learning yes there is a time to be strong, but there has to be a time to be weak also. A time to laugh and a time to cry.

Joel says to the people of God, hear, wake up, mourn. And if that was all he was going to say, then really none of those things is particularly Christian. Lance Armstrong, was one of the great road cyclists in the world, when he was struck down with a life threatening tumour. He stopped, he mourned the fact that he could lose his life and mourned the loss of his super fit body. He listened to those around him who gently told him he may have been a great cyclist, but he wasn't a great person. And he changed, he really changed and that change opened up for him a new life. But as far as I know it didn't open him up to what God wanted him to do with that new life.

4. Hear! Wake Up! Mourn! And cry out! (verses 13-20)

Because this is God's world. We are God's creation. We are totally dependent upon God. And so when tragedy strikes, God wants us to cry out to Him. He doesn't want us to face this all on our own. He doesn't want us to further push our Creator, our Heavenly Father away from ourselves. He doesn't want us to find solace just in family, in medicine, in revenge, in money, in self help therapies. He wants us to come to Him. He wants us to run back to Him like the prodigal son does. He wants us to turn to Him as Jonah does in the belly of the fish. He wants us to remember Him as the thief on the cross does just before he passes away.

So verse 13, *"Put on sackcloth, O priests and mourn; wail you who minister before the altar. Come spend the night in sackcloth you who minister before my God. Declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God and cry out to the Lord."*

Cry out to God. Be honest to God. Talk to God. You might not feel like praising Him, so tell him how you really feel. Tell him that you can't do it on your own. Tell him you need him every hour. Tell him that without his presence life is a drag. Life is no fun. Life is a dead loss.

Cry out to God. Pray to Him. You cannot deal with any disaster in your life without turning to God in prayer. Because to try to deal with a disaster without turning to God in prayer is to simply to face another disaster. When we don't know what to do, when we don't understand, we are to turn to God in prayer. We are to call out to him, asking him to provide his comfort and understanding and peace. We are even to say to Him, God I don't even know what to say, but I know that you can see deep into my heart, my mind, my soul. You know my situation better than words will ever express it.

For in the midst of even the worst disaster God is still in control. Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher from the turn of the last century said, "There is no attribute more

comforting to His children than that of God's sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that sovereignty overrules them, and that sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children ought to more earnestly contend to than the doctrine of their Master over all creation--the Kingship of God over all the works of His own hands--the Throne of God and His right to sit upon that throne, for it is God upon the Throne whom we trust" & the way we show that trust is in prayer.

Years ago Samuel Chadwick said, "Go back! Back to that upper room; back to your knees; back to searching of heart and habit, thought and life; back to pleading, praying, waiting, till the Spirit of the Lord floods the soul with light, and you are endued with power from on high..."

But its more than just prayer, it is repentance. That's what the sackcloth is there to signify. A mourning for one's sins. A turning from one's way of life. Our sins may or may not have caused this disaster that has swamped us. But our sins have caused us to disastrously walk away from God and ignore his ways and his word. And so we need to turn from our wrongdoings and plead for God's mercy. We need to ensure we don't cheapen God's grace by taking all the goodies and ignoring a life of thankfulness. We need to be aware that our sin has partially led to the brokenness of this world.

I read this week the story of a man who walked into the doctor's office and said, "Doctor, I have this awful headache that never leaves me. Could you give me something for it?"

"I will," said the doctor, "but I want to check a few things out first. Tell me, do you drink a lot of liquor?" "Liquor?" said the man indignantly. "I never touch the filthy stuff." "How about smoking?" "I think smoking is disgusting. I have never in my life touched tobacco." "I'm a bit embarrassed to ask this, but—but you don't go and visit the women of the night do you??" "Of course not. What do you take me for? I'm in bed every night by ten o'clock at the latest."

"Tell me," said the doctor, "the pain in the head you speak of, it is a sharp, shooting kind of pain?" "Yes," said the man. "That's it—a sharp, shooting kind of pain." "Simple, my dear fellow! Your trouble is, you have your halo on too tight. All we need to do is loosen it a bit."

So often we are quick to point out every one else's shortcomings rather than our own. And that cut's no ice with God. So we need to cry out to God, repent from our sins. And then Joel says, "*declare a holy fast.*" Be willing to go without food in order to concentrate on your relationship with God. To spend the time that you would normally spend preparing, eating and cleaning up after your meals in order to spend extra time with the Lord.

And make no mistake; it isn't just showing up to pray or even fasting that is the real issue in effectively dealing with disaster. What's really important is what is going on in our hearts. Rend your heart and not your garments. God wants our whole hearts surrendered and broken before him. It is an intimate relationship he offers us, not a ritual or religion. It's his person he calls us to engage.

And we need to do that together. We call a sacred assembly. We gather together in the house of the Lord. We don't just respond as individuals. We respond as a community, as a nation, as a Church family. When disaster strikes any of us or all of us, we need to face it together.

How often do we do this as Church, let alone a nation? We get excited at the big sporting events, at the upcoming cruise, at the time with our family and yet so often we fail to hear what God is saying to us. We are caught up in our dream world that we forget to wake up when the difficult times strike. How often do we come together to pray, how often do we put aside our own wants and needs to fast. How often are we found repenting from our sins? And yet we still want God to bless our lives and grow our Church.

Friends, we as a Church have had a wake up call this year. So we need ensure that we redouble our effort to hear, wake up, mourn and reach out to God.

But back to 9/11. I was watching last year the Chaser's War on Everything and they were interviewing people in America about 9/11. And they asked a simple question. Tell me what date did 9/11 occur? And person after person didn't know. That just reminded me how quickly we forget. Disaster one minute, Irrelevance the next. Lets make sure we are not like that. That we learn the lessons that God is teaching us from both pleasure and pain. Because the stakes are too high for us not to!

