

CCH Sermon 26th May 2019 Joel 1:1-20 The day of the Locust

Today we start a new series in the book of Joel, an old testament prophet, and like most prophets we will hear some **bad news** of judgement and some **good news** of hope.

Let's start with verse 1, which reminds us that what we are about to hear, whether comfortable or challenging, is God's word.

v1. "The **word of the Lord** that came to Joel son of Pethuel".

PRAY.

▲ It was a Tuesday, I can remember that because I had a day off work for my church and I was shopping with my mum in Bromley just South of London, and then a shop assistant said, "have you heard the news?" and we stopped at a shop selling TVs and saw New York's twin towers on fire having been struck by a plane. It was September 11th 2001.

Every once in a while there is an event of such proportions that its impact is etched onto our memory for generations. It leaves everyone reeling, not knowing how to begin to make sense of the situation. *How do we respond? What do we say? How do we think?*

Well it was exactly like that in Joel's day when the locusts struck.

We're going to look at the first chapter of his book under two headings... The day of the Locust, and the day of the Lord.

In the first part, his message is **analysis**: to take stock (recognise and see the crisis for what it is) and in the second the message is **action**: to take action. And we need his message for when a time of crisis comes in our nation, or in our own lives.

1) The Day of the Locust (v1-14)

We don't know much about Joel, except his father's name. We don't know *when* he lived, or exactly *where* he lived in Israel. People have guessed at when this book was written, but the truth is we're not sure exactly. Probably sometime around 600 years before Christ.

Whenever it was, his message of judgement and hope seems to arise out of a specific ecological disaster in his day- a severe locust plague that had completely blighted all the crops.

[Here's](#) 12 seconds of video of 2 locusts, and Trogs if they are brave enough might like to look at the ones David has brought afterwards if still alive- do try and keep them in the box!

If you look carefully at the first 14 verses you'll see they are addressed to different groups of people in the land who are told to sit up and take notice. Joel gives them short sharp commands that I'll put in blue on the right hand side of the screen.

1) The first is the **elders and people living in the land**. They are told to Hear, listen, tell.

V2,3

This is an unprecedented event, that is being passed down through the generations. Like that picture on the screen at the start "9/11 we will never forget".

V4 speaks of the devastation that the different stages of locust life cycle can cause. Probably, hoppers,

Dan has put a [link](#) on the website to a recent clip from David Attenborough's Planet Earth 2 documentary, which includes a locust swarm in Madagascar.

The devastation is shocking. A single locust who lays eggs in June may have 17 million descendents by October.

They eat their bodyweight in food every day, and swarms meet with swarm until you have a plague up to 40 miles wide that consumes absolutely everything in its path.

In 2004 a plague in central Africa covered 10 million acres of land, and overnight in Senegal livelihoods were wiped out.

Joel is saying to them, and to us when we face a crisis. Take it in. Don't skim over it. Recognise its severity. Hear, Listen, tell your children.

2) The second group is the drinkers. Think about it. If all the crops are eaten up, that includes the ingredients for every alcoholic drink. v5. It's like a guy is sitting at the bar, and his drink is swiped out of his hand. In 1916 after a locust invasion, the price of wine doubled! They are not going to be happy. Wake up! Wail! See what's happening.

3) The next group is **the priests and ministers** in the Temple. It starts with a funeral v8. This is like a soldier's wife wailing as the telegram with her husband's death comes through.

Why the mourning? Well if there's no food and drink, it's not just the drunks who are without what they need. The priests can't offer sacrifices of grain or wine in the Temple. v9,10.

And this reminds us that this is not just an *ecological* crisis, this is a *spiritual* crisis, as all crises normally are.

For a bit of background, we need to go back to the first reading that Alaster read to us. Deuteronomy 28:38-45.

God entered into a kind of agreement or even marriage with his people. It's called a covenant. You can read about it in Deuteronomy.

They promised to be his people, and he promised to be their God. And God was very clear that if they were faithful to him there would be covenant blessings- prosperity, food, crops, livestock and so on.

But if the people were like an unfaithful spouse, covenant curses would come. These included failure of the crops, wasting diseases, drought, military defeat and yes....*locusts*.

So do you see that this locust plague is not just ecological (a climate change issue), it's spiritual (a heart change issue). There's a lesson there for all the current climate change discussions, that we don't forget God in all of this.

The people had forgotten God and his commands. They were disobeying him, and God was going to send judgement: crop failure, drought, military defeat and capture (the exile to Babylon) locusts.

➡ Now, just to be clear, I'm not saying that the people that died in the Twin Towers were worse sinners than others. Jesus said exactly those words about a tower that fell down in his day (in Luke 13). But he did use that tower to call people to repentance- to turn back to God, as Joel will do in this book, and as all the prophets of the Old (and in fact New Testament) call us to do.

When we face a crisis, it's a **serious** time, it's a **sad** time, but it's a **spiritual** time. And in God's goodness whether you are a Christian or not it can be a time of growth, and returning to Him. For these people, the suffering WAS linked to their sin.

Let's move through the next few groups and commands quite quickly...

4) The strongest command is given to the farmers. V11.

Despair, or as the ESV translates it "Be ashamed". Of course the farmers are going to feel it the most. In 1958 a locust plague in Ethiopia devoured enough food to feed more than a million people for a year- 167,000 tonnes.

It's absolutely devastating. And there's nothing you can do. You can swipe at the little creatures, you can catch a few in a net, but look around, and v11,12. The wheat, barley, vine, pomegranate, palm, apple tree are gone. Roman writer Pliny wrote in his day that these things eat through wooden doors.

No wonder the farmers are told to despair. What else can they do. And the whole people's joy v12 is as withered as the crops. It's like there's a deep depression over all the land.

In verses 13-14, we track back through some of the same groups and similar phrases. You can see there's a mirror (chiasm) there. Back through the 6) **priests, ministers, 7) elders and inhabitants** again. There's no 5) drunkards (refraining from wine), but people are **refraining from food** in verse14, as Joel instructs the people to come together for a holy fast, a sacred assembly.

☞ We'll move from analysis to action in a moment, but do you see that what Joel teaches us to do whenever a crisis hits is to take stock. To wake up, to let the emotions of the situation strike us.

I don't know about you but as a bloke, and as a "doer", I'm not very good at stopping.

If something challenging happens in my life, I want to slide it under the carpet, or move onto the next project, by just keeping busy or explaining it away as not very serious. Keep calm and carry on. It's the British way. But it's not always the best way.

Perhaps you are facing a personal crisis small or large at the moment. Something to do with your loved ones, something to do with your circumstances. Perhaps somewhere where you are conscious that you have got things wrong.

Take stock. Don't move on too quickly. Look the monster in the eye. Address it. Perhaps with the help of another Christian.

There was an [article](#) in the New York Times last week (to carry on our NY theme) encouraging people to revisit the ghosts of their past and confront nagging memories.

So let's do this. Let's take stock in three areas.

1) Look at our nation. Take stock. See the devastation caused by godlessness and sin. Could the current divisions and fruitlessness in parliament be a symptom of our turning our back on our JudaeoChristian heritage?

2) Look at our lives individually. This series is enables us to take stock of our spiritual lives. How are we really doing with God? What's really going on? Are there lessons to learn, changes to make.

3) Perhaps as a church we need to ask some hard questions. We've had a wonderful start over the last 6 months, with new people joining us. People have been working hard, and there's so much to give thanks for. I don't want to put a dampener on any of that, or suggest that people are getting things horribly wrong. I give thanks for this church every day.

But I'm often challenged by Jesus' challenge to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2. "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary. **Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love you had at first.** "

What a tragedy if in all our doing, we have forgotten who we are doing it for. Remember the first part of our church motto is "*loving Jesus*, loving one another, loving Huntingdon".

Take Stock. Take a look. Declare a holy fast. Let's talk in our life groups a week on Tuesday and Wednesday. Talk with someone afterwards if you need about what's really happening.

- Stage 1. Take stock.
- Stage 2? Take Action. And what is that action? Let's move to the second part.

2) The day of the Lord (v15-20).

In verses 16-18 there seems to be more of the the taking stock that we've seen so far in chapter 1.

V16-18

But verse 15 is different.

V15.

We are introduced to a theme that comes up 5 times in the book. And several times elsewhere in the prophets.

The day of the Lord.

It is code for a day when God will come and decisively judge his enemies. A day of darkness, a day of judgement.

But the point is, that this day of judgement seems to be aimed against God's rebellious people.

What is the Day of the Lord? Is Joel referring to the day of the locust then, or another day coming up? Well, while the locust plague is a day of God's judgement, the phrase "day of the Lord" seems to look forward. To another day that is "near" and coming in the future.

One day God is going to come in ultimate judgement and right all wrongs. The new Testament picks up this language speaking about the day when Jesus returns to judge.

Have you ever heard someone say "frost is a foretaste of winter" or in today's weather, the roses are coming out, summer is on its way.

Well if this locust plague is bad, it is a foreshadowing, a harbinger of worse judgement to come. And that's what's so horrifying about this book, and perhaps why the language escalates into warfare and fire in David's passage next week.

V15.

And in next week's passage. 2:1 and 2:11.

If the day of the Locusts is bad, the day of the Lord is going to be unimaginable.

We need to wake up to the reality of judgement and take it seriously.

▲ I was in St Ives on the day that the Notre Dame fire was being brought under control. And I was in the library thinking about the book of Joel. And I tried to let the destruction of Notre Dame (the day of the fire) point me forward to the day of the Lord.

Imagine being under tonnes of burning wood as it collapses. It's horrific. Thank God that no-one was hurt.

But one day judgement will come on all unforgiven sin. God's holy and perfect justice will burn against all who

No wonder V15. Alas for the day, for the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Judgement is coming.

We shy away from Judgement. It sounds too "hellfire and brimstone", too puritanical.

It's hard to talk about. But Jesus spoke about it plainly.

And Christianity doesn't make sense without it. Why did Jesus have to die, if God a God of indifference smiles weakly at a world that is fine as it is as it rips itself apart with lies, unfaithfulness,.

The truth is that the world is falling apart, and so are all of our lives, and we need God's grace and mercy so desperately.

Joel doesn't just call us to analysis, he calls us to action, and though there will be more on this next week, it starts with coming back to God in prayer.

V14, we saw Joel call the people to *cry out to the Lord*.

And in verse 19,20, Joel himself does the same... "To you O Lord I call". *Oh Lord, show me my sin and show me my saviour*.

The first place when we are aware of God's anger is not to flee from him but to return to Him. For his Holiness does not cancel his love, and he offers a way back through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

"To you Lord I call". And when we do, we can be confident that he does hear.

Take Stock! Take Action!

We're going to do both of these things now.

We will listen to a piece of music which gives us a chance to take stock. The words are taken from Lamentations, another similar time of devastation for the people of God, when an army not of locusts but of people came and devastated the land leaving Jerusalem in ruins.

Take the opportunity prayerfully to "survey the damage".

And then cry out.

And then David will lead us in prayer, as we cry out to the Lord for ourselves, for our church, and for our nation. "To you O Lord I call".