

Ash Wednesday

The trauma of the Babylonian exile is passed, the Jewish people have been able to return home, the temple and the city walls have been re-built, but then a terrible locust plague destroys the year's harvest, followed by a drought. The grain, the wine and the oil are gone – everything necessary to offer the grain and drink offerings to the Lord – the law of Sinai can no longer be fulfilled. Communion with God has been cut off.

How were the Jewish people to understand this? The Old Testament understanding of the natural world was that it was a gift from God. It did not belong to Israel; they were merely stewards of it. Indeed, they were expected to be faithful stewards of the land and its gifts lest it be taken away from them. They were to remain faithful to God, the lord of nature and the giver of land, and could expect judgement if they turned away from him.

And so, the prophet calls the priests to lament and to lead the people in repentance.

All of this precedes this evening's reading – the first half of chapter 2.

In verses 1 and 2 of chapter 2 we are warned of the imminent coming of the day of the Lord. Judgement follows judgement. The previously recalled plague and drought serve as events against which to express the incomparably greater danger of the coming judgement by God at the hands of his army.

In the wake of this prophecy, the question rings out 'Who can endure it?'

"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.'

A returning to God with all of their heart – true repentance – is the right, and indeed only appropriate, response in the light of their sins, and the judgement of God. But repentance does not coerce God; he is gracious and merciful to whoever he chooses to be, yet it is this grace and mercy they are called to rely upon – it is sufficient.

Israel's priests are commanded to call the entire nation to repent; all must repent, for no one can escape the judgement of God. Everyone from the oldest to the youngest – even the nursing infants are to repent.

But we are not living in the Ancient Near East. We have ceased to believe that natural disasters are used by God to mete out judgement on the nations, haven't we? And as for the final judgement of God – whatever form that might take – isn't our primary focus on ensuring that we, each, individually, are right with God?

So how are we to read this passage today, especially in the light of the Covid pandemic? Today we are, by and large, scientifically-minded people and, as I have just alluded to, we do not see the judgement of God in natural disasters. Passages like this, therefore, give us pause for thought. If we confess God as lord of all creation – lord of nature – then we must, by

extension, when a natural catastrophe strikes, ask whether God is calling us to repentance, as he was calling Israel in the time of Joel.

It is unlikely that the absolute origin of the current pandemic will be discovered, but our unceasing encroachment into the natural world, I would suggest, may well be a significant factor.

Can we hear in the voice of God calling us to repent of our greed, and our mindless plundering of the planet?

Can we hear the voice of God calling us to repent of our idolatry of the self, and of financial wealth?

Can we hear the voices of our poorest neighbours crying out, along with creation, in distress?

Who are the priests that are to call our nations to repentance?

My friends, it is us, the very body of Christ here on earth. We are called, in the beatitudes, to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world; Jesus calls us to 'let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.'

It is we who must 'call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast.'

Who knows whether the Lord will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, if we as a nation return to the Lord? Individual repentance is not enough: no one will escape the climate catastrophe that our ancestors began and we have exacerbated. And no one will escape the coming day of the Lord.

Individual repentance may not be enough, but it is where we may begin. Let us, therefore, together, rend our hearts and not our clothes. Let us remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Let us turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ that we may take his call to repentance out with us as we leave this solemn assembly.