

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for the second service – Year A, Pentecost - Eric Brown

Lectionary Readings: **Joel 2: 21-32**
 Acts 2: 14-21, (22-38)
 Luke 24: 44-53

Little is known of Joel – one of the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. There are, in fact, only two references to him in the Bible – in verse 1 of the 1st chapter of his prophecy (*“The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel”*) and in Acts 2, where Peter says to the crowd on the Day of Pentecost *“These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people’”*

Biblical scholars are not certain when Joel lived. Some suggest that it was in the days of King Uzziah – a king who reigned over Judah for 52 years, making that Kingdom powerful and prosperous. During his reign desert places were converted into fertile land and the people of Judah lived in a land of plenty.

For most of his reign Uzziah was faithful to Yahweh but power and success led, almost inevitably, to corruption in the later part of his life and he attempted to usurp priestly duties in the Temple; leading to his affliction with leprosy - his son Jotham ruling in his place until he died. His death was significant – you will remember that a vision of *“the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted”* came to Isaiah *“In the year that King Uzziah died”*.

In the prophecy of Joel there has clearly been a time of plenty but the crops etc. have been destroyed by *“the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm”*. A footnote in the NIV tells us the precise meaning of the four Hebrew words used here for locusts is uncertain. Another commentator suggests the four different Hebrew words are used to indicate the intensity of the plague. [In April 2020, Northern Kenya was devastated by a locust swarm. An adult desert locust weighs about 2 grams and can eat its own bodyweight each day. Swarms can swell to 70 billion insects, consuming over 135,000 tonnes of vegetation in a day!! Coupled with severe drought East Africa is in crisis – Worldvision, Save the Children and Oxfam are among the charities working to bring relief.]

Joel sees the Hand of God in the locust swarm – he refers to it as the “Lord’s army”. In becoming powerful and plenteous Judah had, in typical Old Testament fashion, become decadent. The plague of locusts has brought devastation but now Joel is giving a message of hope and a promise for the future. In the same way that there will be physical restoration, the land becoming fertile and plentiful again, there will also be a restoration of the people to the Lord. *“Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed”*.

Joel has a Vision of the “Day of the Lord” – those words which Peter recalled on the Day of Pentecost; the Lord pouring out His Spirit on all people.

There is a crowd in Jerusalem that morning, and it will have been a real crowd because devout Jews from all over the Roman world have travelled there to celebrate Shavout (The Feast of Weeks – the time of the summer wheat harvest). The crowd assume, and probably call out, that the disciples are drunk. Peter rounds on this accusation – it is only nine in the morning! He then goes on to quote that passage from Joel which is part of the Lectionary Readings for both the principal and the second service this Pentecost Sunday. The principal service has verses Acts 2: 1–21; the second service, verses 14-38, with the option to omit verses 22-38.

Pauline, in her service for Pentecost has referred to the Lectionary Reading finishing, just as Peter is about to commence his **“eloquent and powerful”** sermon. It is this sermon, once again, that can be left out of the reading for the second service – but what a sermon! What a transformation in Peter – telling his Jewish “congregation” that Jesus is God’s promised Messiah and that **they** were responsible for His death. It was part of God’s Plan but **you**, with the help of wicked men, nailed Him to a cross. Would the pre-Pentecost Peter have dared to utter such words?

As the sermon draws to a close we read:

‘Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.’

³⁷ *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’*

³⁸ *Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’*

We also read in verse 40 that he spent time warning them and pleading with them, that they might believe. It was through the work of the Holy Spirit that about 3000 became followers that day.

I remember the last Crusade that Billy Graham conducted in the UK. One of the rallies was held at Selhurst Park – the home of Crystal Palace F.C. Along with another Christian colleague I took some pupils from our school in Croydon to that meeting. A number of them went forward at the altar call. On the way back to the minibus we were discussing what had influenced these pupils - it hadn't been the oratory and there could be no accusation of Billy Graham having created an emotional appeal. The message had been simple and direct – we could only come to one conclusion, the Holy Spirit was at work that evening.

Peter's appeal to that Pentecost crowd:

Repent. Be baptised in the name of Jesus – for the forgiveness of sin. You will receive the Holy Spirit!!

Luke at the end of his Gospel has the risen Jesus opening the minds of His disciples so that they could understand the Scriptures. What has happened had to happen – it was foretold in the Old Testament. They, the disciples, are witnesses. He then promises them the Holy Spirit.

Stay in the city – wait in Jerusalem until this happens. The promise to them; the promise to us is that the Holy Spirit will bring POWER – the power to do God's will in our lives.

John in his Gospel records Jesus promising the Holy Spirit: (John 14: 16-17, 25-26)

“¹⁶I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever –¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”

“²⁵ ‘All this I have spoken while still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.’”

Later in chapter 16 he writes:

“⁵ but now I am going to him who sent me. None of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’”⁶ Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things. ⁷ But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ about sin, because people do not believe in me; ¹⁰ about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; ¹¹ and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

¹² ‘I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. ¹³ But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.

¹⁵ All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.’ “

These promises were made to the disciples. After they had remained in Jerusalem the Holy Spirit was “poured” on them at Pentecost. That same Holy Spirit was “poured” on Cornelius and his household as Peter spoke to them in Caesarea – having himself followed the Spirit's prompting:

“¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Simon, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.’ “

Let us pray that, like Peter, we also can know the Spirit “poured” onto us – to be open to every prompt.

As Fred Pratt Green writes (STF 388):

Let every Christian pray,
this day, and every day,
come, Holy Spirit, come!
Was not the Church we love
commissioned from above?
Come, Holy Spirit, come!

The Spirit brought to birth
the Church of Christ on earth
to seek and save the lost:
God never has withdrawn
since that tremendous dawn,
those gifts of Pentecost

Always the Spirit strove
to teach her how to love:
come, Holy Spirit, come!
Age after age, anew,
she proved the gospel true:
come Holy Spirit, come!

Only the Spirit's power
can fit us for this hour:
come, Holy Spirit, come!
Instruct, inspire, unite;
and make us see the light:
come, Holy Spirit, come!