

Psalm 130 Joel 2:12-17 St. Matthew 6:16-21

Turn to Me

How does one interpret national disaster? When religious fanatics ram planes into buildings filled with men and women from every corner of the globe...when Sunamis wash away thousands of people...when earthquakes devastate an entire country...how are we, as believers in a Sovereign God, to interpret these events? Is it, as the late Dr. Jerry Falwell said on more than one occasion, the judgment of God...not to mention Pat Robertson and others? Or is it simply bad luck? Just the way things are in a fallen, broken world? Is it because we have too many children, drive too many cars, or have too much wealth? Or is it because we are bad, other people are bad, or God is bad – or worse – that God is indifferent or uninvolved?

The prophet Joel didn't seem to have much of a problem interpreting a national disaster in his day as a wrathful act of God. Apparently a whole series of calamities, one of which was a huge swarm of locusts, had descended upon the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the prophet not only interpreted these events as being sent by God, but also he saw them as the forerunners of even worse disasters to come...unless...unless those who called themselves God's people turned back to Him with genuine repentance...with all their heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning over their sinful ways.

But Joel had one up on us...if you look back to the beginning of his book you will read that his prophetic utterances were not based upon his own finite opinion. Look at verse 1 of chapter 1: The *Word of the Lord* that came to Joel the son of Pethuel...so perhaps it would be better for us lesser mortals to refrain from making any rash statements about natural disasters until we tap into the same direct line, don't you think?

You see, it really isn't very helpful to ask questions we simply cannot answer. So, perhaps it would be better for us to spend our time looking at those questions which we can answer...in other words, let us leave the speculation as to why national disasters occur and deal with that which is not speculation at all...the need for us to examine our own lives in the light of what God has revealed to us in His Word (especially the manner in which we respond to events beyond our control)...and also the need for us to work on getting these two (our lives and God's will) on the same page, as it were...and this is basically what the act of repentance is all about.

Now, the first essential of true repentance is a reorientation of ourselves from ourselves toward God. What matters most in life is a right relationship with our Creator and Sustainer. Religion in and of itself is useless...it is just another system...one way of life among many. That's why our Lord Jesus warned us against fasting for the wrong reasons...to appear to others to be fasting so that they may think that we are such holy people...that's nothing but a pious diet with a few public relations fringe benefits. Ritual has to be coupled with a real relationship with the only true and living God if it is to have any lasting and positive effect on our lives.

And this is true with regard to repentance as well. The ritual of confession without a real relationship with the Lord is like saying sorry to someone you have wronged, but only because you got caught out...you don't really mean it and will most likely do it again if you can get away with it. For this reason, our Lord used very clear language when speaking through His prophet: "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your hearts and not your garments; return to the Lord your God..." All too often we either confess our sins because that's just what we

do as liturgical Anglicans...or we confess because we are a little afraid of the possible consequences...but we rarely confess because we see sin as God sees it...as something so serious that it disrupts our real relationship with God and with others. Genuine heartfelt distress and loathing of anything contrary to the will of God can only come about when our blindness is removed so that we might see our waywardness and self-centeredness through God's eyes.

We must really be very weary of simply engaging in an outward show of religiosity simply because it is that time of year...Lent...God sees our heart, dearest brethren...He sees the innermost me...the real me...the real you...nothing is hidden from His penetrating view. So, why waster our time and His time pretending to do something we all know He knows isn't true? God knows where our true treasure lies...He knows the reality inside of each and every single one of us. So, if we are going to do anything at all this Lent, let it be from the heart...

However, having said that, because mankind seems to have this propensity to swing to extremes, such heartfelt repentance can turn into morbid introspection and an unhealthy preoccupation (once again) with ourselves. So, we need to focus, not so much on our sinfulness, but rather on God's holiness and His desire for us to be holy as He is holy. To this end, we have His assurance of His merciful forgiveness and His ever-present help through the power of His Holy Spirit Who lives in each one of us. Remember, our Lord Jesus came into the world to save sinners, not to condemn them...the Father sent His Son into the world that the world might be saved through Him. This is the nature of the God we need to turn to with all our heart. He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and will prefer to forgive us rather than to judge us harshly.

Besides, as the Psalmist says, if God was to keep tabs on our iniquities, who would ever be able to stand before Him? But that is the essence of the Gospel...there is forgiveness with our God. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to take the penalty for our sins upon Himself and to die in our stead. And, by the way, knowing the nature and character of our God helps us when we try to make sense of national disasters. He is not a God Who delights in our calamity...He has done everything possible to secure our blessedness and happiness. And this is why He ought to be sought after...this is why He ought to be praised and honored...this is why we ought to repent of our waywardness and stubbornness...He is kind, compassionate, forgiving and merciful. So, when we come to God in repentance, we come knowing that He is more than willing to accept us if we are biblically sincere...and please note my definition of what true sincerity is...biblically informed sincerity is what I am talking about...sincerity in and of itself is simply not enough...you can be totally misguided and still totally sincere.

Then, finally, there is an appropriate time to call for corporate or perhaps even national repentance...to sound a trumpet, as it were, so that all believers may gather together before our Lord's throne in an acknowledgement of our corporate wretchedness as the community that bears His Name before the world. This is what Ash Wednesday is all about. There is a time when it is appropriate for us as His people to publicly acknowledge that we have not always loved God as we ought nor have we always loved our neighbors as we ought to have loved them...there is a time for us to state clearly that we have failed to do what we ought to have done and that we have done what we ought not to have done. There is something both humbling and encouraging in witnessing our collective frailty...when people realize that they are not alone in their struggle to live

holy lives then they are encouraged not to despair when the going gets tough. Notice that in Judah were all called to gather together in repentance. Look at verses 16 and 17. “Assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes; let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar.” This reinforces what St. Paul said that all have sinned and all fall short of God’s glory...we tend to forget this and sometimes think that we are alone in our doubts and fears...but not so! We all are in need of God’s forgiveness and His help.

And so we gather together this evening as His children to consider our ways as we come before His throne. The amazing truth demonstrated here at our Lord’s Table is that God has chosen to set His love on us...in spite of our unworthiness...that He has made us His people...in spite of our frailty and our faults...that the honor of His Name is publicly involved in what happens to us as the world looks at us and asks, “Where is their God?”

And so we can come into His presence with great confidence that He will receive all who truly turn to Him with all their heart as the cross portrays His commitment to us...that there God has delivered us for the glory of His own Name, because He wants us to be His own people so that our own unworthy state may no longer bring such disharmony in His world and no longer bring dishonor to His Name.