

St. Mary's Sermons

Ash Wednesday 2020

Joel 2

In 1977, in his book "How to be born again", Billy Graham wrote: 'Several years ago I was to be interviewed at my home for a well-known television show and, knowing it would appear on nationwide television, my wife Ruth took great pains to see that everything looked nice. She had vacuumed and dusted and tidied up the whole house but had also gone over the lounge with a fine tooth-comb since that was where the interview would be filmed. When the film crew arrived with all the lights and cameras, she felt that everything in the lounge was spic and span. We were in place along with the interviewer when suddenly the television lights were turned on and we saw cobwebs and dust where we had never seen them before. In the words of my wife Ruth, "That room was festooned with dust and cobwebs which simply did not show up under ordinary light."'

Whenever we read the bible, whenever we read God's word, it is as though the light of the Holy Spirit shines into every area of our lives and exposes any darkness that otherwise we would not be aware of. This is not something that we should be afraid of. God does not expose our weakness in order to condemn us and make us feel guilty but because he wants the very best for us, to encourage us to repent and with his help to do something about those issues which spoil our lives. Lent provides us with an excellent opportunity do some spiritual spring cleaning in our lives.

This evening's reading is from one of my favourite prophetic books in the bible. The Book of Joel is thoroughly relevant to the 21st Century Church and, indeed, to anyone with the inkling that there is an Almighty God of justice at work in our world and in our lives. It is a short Old Testament book that can be read in full, out loud, in approximately 12 minutes; and

I'm quite a slow reader. It is a book of prophecy, written at some point between 500-350 BC, in which the Prophet Joel quotes prophets from years before; Joel also points ahead to the Holy Spirit being poured out, and he calls for repentance in order to be saved on the future Day of the Lord. It is a book that clearly resonates with the Gospel of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus. First, Joel announces God's very real judgment on human sin; but secondly, Joel proclaims the merciful grace of God who won't abandon his covenant people to destruction.

More and more, as I read the Old Testament, I find it helpful to imagine Jesus himself reading or hearing these words. As Jesus absorbed the full implications of the Hebrew Scriptures, his self-awareness of his role as Messiah increased. We know, that as a 12-year-old, Jesus sat in the Temple with Bible scholars, and I am convinced that he continued to study and apply the Hebrew Scriptures both before and during his ministry.

In the oral culture of Jesus day the stories of God's dealing with his people would have been told over and over again and people would have been used to committing large sections of scripture to memory. So during his 40 days in the desert Jesus was able to continue to be immersed in the scriptures as he did battle with temptation. Jesus was able to recall and meditate upon the truth of the Bible to ensure that his motives, his mind-set, and his future ministry fulfilled the will of his father. He allowed the light of God's word to shine into every nook and cranny, every alcove, every aspect of his life, his thoughts, and his private desires. Indeed according to Hebrews 4 he was tempted in every way, just as we are yet unlike us he was completely without sin. His life was totally free of cobwebs and free of dust.

The Book of Joel is a vivid reminder that the Lord is coming in judgement against a world of sin. In Joel 1: 13 the Temple Priests are called to repentance, as indeed are the whole people of God: “Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn: wail, you who minister before the altar. Come spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before the altar.”

Is anyone up for a night of prayer and repentance?

Tonight’s Bible reading began like this: “Even now, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Joel 2: 12-13).

When I read Billy Graham’s account of what happened when the television lights were switched on in his house, I had to smile because that’s exactly the sort of thing that my wife does. Last weekend her brother Anthony came up from Norfolk to visit us and she spent the whole of Friday afternoon changing the bedding, vacuuming and dusting the house so that it looked pristine before they arrived. Every part of the house where they were likely to see got the once over. But there is one part of our house that that I have to admit is in a complete mess; I would be so embarrassed if anyone saw it and that is the garage. Everything that nobody knows what to do with it seems to end up being put in there. After being at the Rectory for eleven years it is so full that it is completely impossible to get the car in it. I’m dreading the thought of ever moving. Every time I go in it I am reminded that it really does need to be dealt with; but it is the sort of job that inevitably gets put off until another day.

The charity shops will have a field day when I eventually get around to sorting it!

It seems to me that this is a very good illustration of much more important spiritual truth. It is time to repent of the mess of sins that shows up under the light of God's holiness. We should not delay dealing with the problem any longer. Those of us who have been Christians for any length of time, like Billy Graham's wife Ruth when she prepared there house for the tv interview will no doubt have done a great job with the obvious stuff; but the bright light of the holiness of God reveals that there are still some areas of our lives that our loving heavenly Father still needs to clean up. That process can start right here, right now, tonight.

We all know very well that the Lord hates sin. The Lord hates the mess of sin in our life and he wants us to cooperate with him to get it cleaned up, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. We cannot do this on our own. We do that by admitting the problem, saying sorry and asking God by the power of the Holy to help us to change.

On the cross Jesus paid the price for the sins of the whole world and on the day of Pentecost the Father sent the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to be transformed, into the glorious likeness of his son. Let's be a people who will leave no stone unturned, no cobweb un-swept, and no dust that's been allowed to gather.