

Sunday 23rd October 2022

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Readings Joel 2:23-32 ([Living Bible](#))

Reflection 1

At first glance this is a very reassuring reading. The people of Israel have come through many tough times, and at the beginning of the book of Joel the prophet predicts another – a swarm of locusts will devour the land and leave the people devastated and hungry. Whether this reference to locusts is actual insects or a metaphor for an invading army we cannot be sure. However, in this reading from Joel we have the reassurance that all will be well and God will restore Israel's fortunes and a new time of hope will emerge.

This passage is typical of many Old Testament passages which echo with the reassurance that God will save his people. This idea is at the heart of the notion that people of faith are protected from bad happenings, and yet everyday people of good faith, who trust in God find themselves adrift when life throws a curved ball and sometimes it is hard to see how life can ever be normal again. So how can we use such passages to offer reassurance when we are aware of faithful people who feel abandoned by God?

Life is rarely, if ever, perfect and we travel a journey of life and faith placing our trust in the God of love. As people of relationships we know that love is a vital part of our experience, and we also know that however much we love someone we cannot protect them from everything. Unless we believe in a God who manipulates things in favour of some and not others, then life happens and it is not always good. That does not mean we are abandoned, we are still held in the love of God and in that love we can find courage and fortitude but if we preach a gospel of protection we deny the reality of an evolving creation of which we are a part.

Taking this passage literally suggests that God has made these bad things happen but that is an expression related to the evolution of faith at that time. The inexplicable was often blamed on God, but at the same time people trusted that God would reinstate good fortune. There are times and occasions in life when we have to accept that nothing will be the same again, when circumstances change and the future changes with them. Accidents and illnesses happen.

Some years ago I was involved in a project looking at the spirituality of acquired brain injury. Acquired brain injury is a term which covers anything that permanently affects the workings of the brain, it can be the result of an accident or a stroke or cancer. We set up a conference of survivors, carers, health professionals and theologians to come together and talk about the spiritual effect of such injuries. It was fascinating, some people who had no faith before the injury were left with a deep sense of the presence of God, and some who had a deep faith were left with no faith, their memory of any experience of God or concept of God completely lost. There was no discernible pattern to this. We listened to the experiences of survivors and the observations of carers and as theologians we were struck by how the church in its interpretation of scripture has often ill-prepared people for such an experience. One particular story will always stay with me, a young man of deep faith explained how he had been told by his church that if he fell God would always catch him. He acquired his injury when he fell from a building, God did not catch him, and he no longer believed in God.

The fragility of mental health is a key topic in society and the pandemic has made us all more aware of the struggles people are facing, particularly those under thirty-five. Statistics show that during the pandemic the number of 18-25 year olds expressing a feeling of hopelessness rose and self-harming also reached a new level. Statistics for 25-34 year olds showed an alarming rise in suicidal

feelings. How as church can we help young people to explore the reassurance of knowing God and the difference it might make to their experience of life?

The World Council of Churches has expressed the view that the world provides the agenda for church, mental health is a significant factor in the world today and it needs to be on our agendas.

Reading Luke 18:9-14

Reflection

Here we have a parable which is about attitude. It was told it appears to a group of pharisees, who were behaving as if they were better than others and it shines a light on their behaviour and with a twist at the end invites them to consider their behaviour in the light of the gospel of love. It invites us to consider the temptation to compare ourselves against others but also to not love ourselves. Both of these things can lead us into difficult places.

Today, social media continually tempts people to compare and contrast, to compare their life to the lives fantasised about on social media and to almost inevitably judge their own experience of life as less worthy. Many of us know someone who has been caught in the trap of social media and too many of us know of someone who found themselves with no way out, hopelessness giving way to self-harm and often suicide. That sense of unworthiness leading to a lack of love of self.

This parable demonstrates two extremes but they are places we can all find ourselves at some point in time. The gospel message of Jesus was all are loved, all are important and nothing can separate us from God's love. I was involved in pastoral care following a sermon in which people were told suicide was a sin and sins meant eternal damnation. There were present a couple whose son had recently committed suicide! The gospel I believe speaks of God's unconditional forgiveness, so why would an act of desperation separate anyone from God's love? The pain and desperation felt by every human is a part of God, but just as light overcomes darkness so love overcomes fear. God is everywhere, therefore God is in all people and all people are in God, held in love. We can choose to ignore or reject that message but it does not alter the fact that we are held in love. God's love is not an external love, it is a shared love, we are God's love for others. When we judge others, that is not love, when we judge ourselves we deny God within us. We need to learn to accept ourselves and become ever more loving.

We often struggle to accept our flaws, and whilst somewhere deep within we acknowledge that all is not well, we go to amazing lengths to keep the truth hidden, even from ourselves at a conscious level. Leonard Cohen in his song Anthem wrote, – forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in. What difference would it make to accept ourselves and others as a work in progress, not yet perfect but doing our best in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. If we truly share the message of Jesus then the call is to become communities that are honest and welcoming, a place of safety for those on the journey.

Rachel Held Evans, a Christian blogger, wrote this –

'the gospel does not need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting welcome, there's bread and wine, come eat with us and talk.'

This is the principle behind the Friendship café we have started at Wigmore but perhaps the challenge is to start a friendship café for young adults. An evening when we throw open the doors and offer refreshment and a place with space to talk, it would need comfy chairs and a café style culture, but then maybe church needs that anyway!

Perhaps we can summarise this parable from Luke as 'the kingdom is not for the worthy, the kingdom is for the hungry'. It is for those who recognise they are on a journey to fullness, but have a way to go, and realise the way is easier when we travel together. Instead of hiding our cracks we need to mark them in gold and celebrate a little more light coming into our lives.