

### **30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; Luke 18:9-14; II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18.**

**Joel 2:23-32** is written by the prophet Joel, of whom nothing is known except that he was the “son of Pethuel” (1:1). The prophecy can’t be dated except by internal evidence that seems to best point to the postexilic period in the fifth or fourth centuries BCE. The occasion for his writing seems to have been a great infestation of locusts that must have destroyed almost all of Israel’s crops. That plague is used as a foretaste of the great destruction that Joel is convinced will befall both Israel and the remainder of the world, which Joel calls “the Day of the Lord”.

It is the theme of the Day of the Lord that permeates the entirety of the book of Joel (e.g., 1:15; 2:1-2, 10-11, 17, 27, 31, 3:1-2 and 14-17) and weaves it together into a whole. The Day of the Lord is a “great and awesome day” (2:11), in which Israel will be visited with “a great destruction from the Almighty” (1:15). But it will be a day of judgment for the Gentile nations of the world, as well (3:2-16). As it inevitably approaches, therefore, the wisest course of every Israelite, Joel suggests, is to repent. Repentance is understood not only as meaning to confess one’s sins and to turn from them, but also to change the very course and priorities of your life (2:15-17). For God “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (2:13). And such mercy and steadfastness of love is guaranteed to all who repent, for “there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:32).

Although it is a minor prophecy that is neither referred or alluded to by other Old Testament writers, Joel is a prophet that is greatly used throughout the New Testament. It is particularly used by Jesus and by the author of Revelation in passages having to do with the final judgment (Mark 13:24; Luke 21:25; Rev. 6:9; 9:2). Paul uses Joel 2:32 to prove his argument in Romans 10:13. And the most substantive use of Joel in the New Testament is the extensive quotation Peter uses from Joel in the inaugural sermon of the Christian movement in Acts 2:16-21. That quotation is taken from today’s lesson from Joel. So Joel plays a major role in early Christian teaching.

In today’s Old Testament lesson, Joel presents hope to the Jewish settlers living in Palestine. They have just survived a plague of locusts that has destroyed all the crops, stripped the fields bare and left the nation destitute. But God proclaims to the people, “O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given the early rain for your vindication; he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rains, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame” (2:23-26).

God promises to Israel that their land will be restored, their economy made abundant again, and that they will “eat in plenty and be satisfied”. Thus, this devastating plague of locusts that at present looks so insurmountable will someday be over and God will restore Israel’s fortunes. There is hope before them. And how does Israel know to take this promise as being true? “You

shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other! My people shall never again be put to shame” (2:27). God has given God’s word. Therefore, it will happen as he said that it will. He guarantees it!

Then comes the famed passage used so powerfully in Peter’s inaugural sermon of the Christian faith. “Then afterward, I the Lord your God will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood before the great and terrible Day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (2:28-32).

Joel proclaims that, at one and the same time, the Day of the Lord will be both horror and triumph! It will be a day when all human society will be shaken both literally and figuratively to its very foundations, as what seems as total destruction will come down upon nations, structures and systems as they currently operate. But it will be a day of triumph, as well. God’s spirit will be poured out upon “all flesh” so that the political, economic and social barriers that formerly separated and divided people across society will be eliminated, and people will be united in a new relationship of ecstasy, of intense awareness of and relationship with God and each other (“pour out my spirit on all flesh”, even on slaves, sons and daughters will prophesy and old and young will “dream dreams”).

Thus, Joel proclaims that there will come a day when the world will be turned right side-up as its social, political and economic structures are turned upside-down. For those obsessed with holding power, maintaining dominance and hoarding wealth, it will be a day of disaster. But for those who are eager to embrace God’s kingdom of justice, equity and loving relationships between God and humanity, it will be a day of triumph and joy and ecstasy! You decide which side you will be on, for God offers you the opportunity to repent of your commitment to power, wealth and control and to embrace the world as God intends it to be!

**Psalm 65** is a hymn of thanksgiving for the earth’s bounty. It is essentially a list of earth’s fecundity and God’s interaction with it (“You [God] make the gateways of the morning and the evening shouts for joy.” “You visit the earth and water it; you greatly enrich it.” “You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow<sup>1</sup> with richness” – 65:8b, 9a, 11).

The Psalm is a reminder, therefore, that God blesses us each day with the bounty of the earth. It is not anything we have the right to receive, nor should we take the receiving of it for granted. Earth’s bounty is always a gift given to us by God, even though we help to till and care for it. It is a continuing resource invested in us by God so that we might be good stewards of its use, thus building the common wealth of the nation and manifesting that increase of wealth in the elimination of poverty throughout the land. Thus, one can cry out:

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<sup>1</sup> “Your wagon tracks overflow with richness”. This seemingly -strange statement is a reference to a common experience in ancient Israel; the Psalmist likens the fecundity of God to a wagon full of seed and lumbering down the road; as it rumbles along, seed is shaken off it onto the ground and there sprout into life. Thus, the route of the wagons can be traced by an overabundance of an unplanned harvest.

“By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest areas” (65:5).

**Luke 18:9-14** is the famed parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (or “tax collector”). The usual (and not illegitimate) interpretation of this parable is that this parable is about the arrogant self-righteousness of the Pharisee and the humble repentance and honesty of the Publican. In one sense, that is a correct interpretation. But it is an inadequate interpretation, because it does not get at the heart of the story that Jesus was telling.

Jesus tells of two men who come at the same time to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee stands off from the crowd of people, but prays in a loud and attention-getting voice. His prayer is the height of pride. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people – thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income”. That’s the prayer!

The tax collector also stands by himself, ostracized by the people. He doesn’t even lift his eyes up to heaven (people normally prayed in Jesus’ time, not by kneeling or sitting, but standing with their arms raised, their hands open, and their faces lifted up to heaven). Instead, he beat his breast and only prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” And Jesus comments upon the two men, “I tell you, this (tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (18:14).

This is a powerful story, and obviously is a story that contrasts pride and humility, self-absorption and openness to God and, as a result, rejection or reception by God. In fact, some translations capture this emphasis in a most “juicy” way. They state that the Pharisee prayed, not “by himself” but “to himself” (RSV, KJV, NIV); the man’s prayers went no further than to his own and the public’s ears, but those prayers certainly didn’t go up to God!

There is a far deeper dimension to this parable, however, that goes far beyond a parable simply about humility and pride. And the key to understanding this deeper dimension is based upon the awareness that the tax collector about whom the story is told was not a tax collector! The Greek name that Jesus calls him is *telones* – a toll collector.

What was a toll collector? Operating under the authority of Rome, the elites of Israel supervised the collection and administration of both Roman and Temple taxes. These taxes were prescribed by both Roman law and by the way Israel’s religious-political leaders interpreted the Torah. There were two primary Roman taxes: the toll tax and the land tax. The toll tax was a “head” tax that each head-of-household paid for each person in his family. This was a uniform tax. The land tax, on the other hand, was a large tax levied against land owners based on the size of their holdings. Consequently, it was a tax that most impacted the wealthy landowners of Israel. But they, in turn, passed on that tax to those who worked their land by absorbing those taxes into the charges they would make to farmers for the privilege of working their land. The Temple Tax was the way that the Israelite elite levied their taxes, using the three annual festivals of Israel (First Fruits, Passover and Booths) as their primary means of gathering those taxes. Tax

collectors would be the people appointed to gather all these taxes, and the total tax burden made up about 85% of the average peasant family's annual income!

It is important to understand that tax collection didn't occur in order to pay for the services that the government would provide in exchange for those taxes. Government services were minimal. These exorbitant taxes were raised to go into the pockets of the Roman and Jewish elites along their respective chains of command, and were seen as the plunder that was justifiably theirs.

But raising such taxes was not enough to satisfy the Roman and Jewish elites. Besides these "legal" taxes, they would also implement a wide spectrum of "tolls". If you used a particular road, you would have to pay a toll for that use. If you wished to sell your produce in the market place, you had to get permission from the appropriate government official – and that included paying a duty. If you caught fish from the Sea of Galilee, you had to pay a tariff on each fish caught. If you went to the Temple, you would have to exchange your Roman money for Temple coins at a devastating interest rate. And the people who collected those tolls on behalf of Israel's and Rome's elite were "toll collectors". Not only so, but because toll collectors were paid so little, it was legal for them to extort and swindle money from poor peasants by overcharging the tolls. It even had a name: "legal graft"!

The significance of the social position of the toll collector relates directly to this parable. The toll collector was truly a man "caught between a rock and a hard place". On the one hand, he was a peon of Israel's and Rome's elite. He worked for "the Man"! Because he was at the bottom of the hierarchy of the elite, he was dismissed, despised, and even persecuted by them. But also, because he had to collect the tolls of the peasants already infuriated by the exploitive taxes they were already paying, the people hated toll collectors with an almost-perfect hatred. It was upon them that the full force fell of the anger and resentment the people felt regarding the oppressive tax system in which they saw themselves as victims. They became the direct symbol of "the Man". And therefore, they received all the rage of the people! That is the man about whom Jesus was telling this parable!

The important thing to realize about this parable, therefore, is that both the Pharisee and the toll-collector represented the establishment. Both of them were a part of the elite – the Pharisee near the top and receiving most of the benefit of the toll collector's work. And the toll collector was at the bottom of the elite hierarchy – subject both to the animosity of the people and the scorn of the elite above him (including this Pharisee).

In a profound sense, both the Pharisee and the Publican were toll collectors! The Publican was the toll collector on the ground, receiving both the anger of the people and the scorn of the elite. But the Pharisee was also a toll collector, in that his job was to teach the people the official misinterpretation of the Torah so that they would believe that this unjust way their society operated was society as God designed and intended it to be. The objective of the Pharisee was to use their religion, and their position as the official interpreters of the Torah to support the current system, including sanctioning the taxes and tolls as an integral part of religious purity ("if you're a good Jew, obedient to the Torah, you'll pay your taxes and tolls and never question it").

So what was Jesus actually saying in this parable? What the Pharisee was doing at the Temple was playing his assigned role in the maintenance of Israel as Israel's and Rome's elite wanted it to be (which served them very well!). In a very profound sense, the Pharisee did "pray to himself". That's exactly what he meant to do. He was using the occasion of the daily prayers in the Temple as a way of reinforcing the status quo – the intentional and official "misinterpretation" of the Torah to support the system that he served and that served him well. Thus, he stood apart from all the peasants gathered at the Temple in order not to be made unclean by them. His prayer proclaimed to the people who were close enough to hear him (and he was obviously praying in a very loud and commanding voice) the "rightness" of a political and religious order where there are those who "fast twice a week" (the Torah only required fasting once a year in Lev. 16:29-31), and who "give a tenth of all my income". This Pharisee is using the occasion of the public prayers of the people in the Temple to reinforce the rightness of "the world as it is" and his high place within it.

But he is doing more than that. He proclaims, "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this toll collector". "Thieves" and "rogues" are not good translations of the original Greek; a better translation would be "extortioners, swindlers" – that is, it is referring to specific kinds of thievery and roguery – that of those who grossly overcharged or took advantage of people paying their toll, in order to line their own pockets! Thus, this list is not about four different kinds of people; it is four ways of describing one person – this toll collector!

In other words, what this Pharisee is doing is using the occasion of Temple prayers for two purposes. First, he is reinforcing the commitment of the people to the system that is exploiting and oppressing them by declaring that this is the way that God designed the system to be. Second, he is deflecting away from himself (and the higher "powers" of the Roman and Jewish systems) the people's anger at being so misused and towards the person they would normally target with their rage – the toll collector!

But the toll collector unintentionally beats the Pharisee at his own game, and does so by the way he reacts. How does this toll collector react to such mistreatment? He doesn't become defensive. He doesn't become self-justifying. He doesn't try to escape. Instead, out of a heart broken by the way he has allowed himself to be entrapped by the system, and convicted of his great sin against the people and God through his participation in cheating the poor, he pounds on his breast and cries, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He admits his guilt as an extortioner, swindler, adulterer. He confesses his culpability. And he begs God to forgive him – something the Pharisee desperately needed to do!

Therefore, what was the result? "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (vs. 14). The toll collector was ultimately not entrapped by the system. He confessed how he had misused the system for his own personal gain, and how he had allowed himself to become a part of an oppressive and exploitive and greedy system that was the antithesis of the world as God intended it to be. He publicly confessed his culpability – and then, presumably, he got out of it! He humbled himself in order to become free of the shackles of his slavery, in which he had played an integral role within a system designed to disproportionately increase the

wealth and power of a few at the expense of the peasants and expendables of that society. Thus, because he was willing to be honest with himself, with the people and with God – and as a result was humiliated – he became an exalted man, while the Pharisee, still seeking to maintain his place and power within the system left the Temple rejected by God and despised by the people!

**II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18** is a magnificent summary by Paul of his life and ministry. It consists of two parts. Verses 6-8 are his evaluation of his life. Verses 16-18 present his continued hope in God's capacity to work God's will in any situation, including Paul's trials before Rome.

Paul begins the first section by declaring that his life has been “poured out as a libation, and that the time of (his) departure has come”. His use of the word “libation” is a reference to the Old Testament sacrificial system. In it, a drink offering of wine was poured out in the sanctuary as a sacrifice to God (Num. 15:5-10; 28:7). Likewise, Paul sees both his life and his impending death as his sacrifice to God.

Paul then continues in a striking evaluation of his life and ministry. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (vss. 7-8)-

Paul describes his life work by using a metaphor from the Greek athletic world. He says that he has fought the good fight (i.e., boxing), he has “finished the race” (i.e., track), and he has “kept the faith” (i.e., he has fulfilled his pledge as a runner to win the race). Consequently, he will now receive the “crown” – the laurel which is the prize for the first-place winner of a Greek race, and that crown will be rewarded by the official “judge” of the race, the “Lord”, who is always “righteous” (i.e., “fair” in his adjudication of the race).

But then Paul gives a rather unexpected twist to this metaphor describing his life. He then writes, “and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing”. Whereas in the Greek world of track and field, there was only one winner of each event, in Paul's world all Christians who “have longed for Christ's appearing” will win. The lives of others may not be as dramatic as was Paul's, and they may not have impacted the entirety of the church in the way that Paul had impacted both the church and the world, but every Christian's life matters, and all are called to faithfully fight the good faith and finish the race, while keeping the faith! It is a race all of us are to run, and in faithfully running it, all of us will win.

The second portion of the epistle lesson for this Sunday in Ordinary Time deals with Paul's trust in God to work God's will in every situation in which Paul finds himself. He writes, “At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (vss.16-18).

It has long been debated whether Paul had two trials or one. The advocates of the two-trial scenario believe that Paul won his first trial, was released from Roman prison, made a trip to Spain and perhaps elsewhere to found and/or build up city churches, was arrested a second time in a later Roman persecution, was judged guilty of treason at a second trial and was executed. The one-trial scenario is that Paul conducted himself well at a preliminary hearing but was never released, and in his final trial was found guilty of treason and executed.

This passage is one of the key evidences for the “two-trial” advocates, as they interpret the opening sentences to be a reference to his first trial. In it, Paul expresses his disappointment in Christians who could have come to his defense but did not, but then comments that he was “rescued from the lion’s mouth” (i.e., from Roman jurisprudence). Now that he is facing a second trial, Paul is equally confident that the God who delivered him at the first trial can “rescue (him) from every evil attack and save (him) for his heavenly kingdom”.

However, the passage can equally be read to suggest that Paul did well on his preliminary hearing. But now he is coming before the judge for his full trial. However, he is confident that God will see him through this adjudication.

Whichever alternative reading one prefers, the primary point of this passage is that Paul may or may not win that trial. But whether he wins or loses does not matter. Even if he loses, in a profound sense he has won. For if his life is taken from him, he will wake up in the arms of Jesus! Either way, God is honored. Either way, God’s will is done. And either way, God’s kingdom is advanced!

It was this sort of unquenchable faith that guaranteed that neither Paul nor Paul’s gospel would ever be stopped by any nation, economy, social or religious system. “Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil. 1:20b-21)!

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