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The Prophet Joel: A Message for Today’s Secular World

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English / Ξένες γλώσσες

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And it shall come to pass afterward, that I 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. Joel 2: 28

These words by the prophet Joel (whose name means Yahweh is God) were spoken during the reign of King Uzziah (800 BC). Joel prophesied to the people of Judah and probably came from that area. His life overlapped the prophet Amos and the great prophet Isaiah.

Joel prophesized during a time of great calamity, most often plague and pestilence. He considered these upheavals not only as a natural disaster, but also as a presage of God convulsing the earth known in scriptural terminology the “day of the Lord” which indicated an impending judgment by God when the people broke His law.

The notion of an Old Testament God reigning judgment on the earth strikes modern ears as a quaint relic of the past (but not one that has been drained of all fear). But is this accurate? Or is our modern perception more the detritus of sated hearts and distracted minds; the surfeit of material goods we consume beyond our immediate needs that fills the stomach but dulls the mind?

If the question appears too strong, consider the words of our Lord: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:19-24). What is our treasure?

The treasures of many Westerners are material goods, comfort, wealth, luxury, power, sensual gratification, and technological escape. When any of these elements become an end in themselves, when they distract us from God and the commandment to love Him and our neighbor, they become idols – false gods that substitute for the light and life that has its source and origin only in the true God.

Even worse, in our pursuit of these idols and our conformance to the demands they make on us, we manipulate other people in order to experience the satiation the idols offer. We hurt others to obtain idolatrous treasure and in so doing break the commandment of God to love our neighbor. This is unadulterated secularism. The neighbor exists not as a person we are called to love, but a person who can gratify our desires.

It's a perilous road to travel and our muted moral awareness makes it all the more dangerous. Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). This passage refers not only to the good things we might do for our neighbor but the bad things as well. If we abuse someone or use them in pursuit of idolatrous rewards, then we have committed a grievous offense against God.

When Joel prophesied of the impending calamity many centuries ago, he described it in terms of a public disaster that would come upon all the land. He used terms like "destruction" and "pestilence" that are still meaningful today, especially with our recent experience of volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornados.

One description however, invites special notice. In first chapter of the Book of Joel it is written: "For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and without number; its teeth are lion's teeth and it has the fangs of a lioness" (Joel 1). In Arabic the word for lion is "Osama."

While we cannot conclude that Joel's prophesy concerns Osama Bin Laden, the complaint of moral corruption of the perfidious Christian West from Bin Laden and other radical Muslims is right on the mark. If God still judges the nations for corruption like He judged ancient Israel (and I believe He does), then the rise of the lion from the East is a call for the repentance of the Christian West. This would be an application of the gift of prophesy given to us by the Holy Spirit applied in modern times (1 Corinthians 14:1-3).

The God of Abraham who spoke through Joel still speaks to us in these later days, but His voice won't be heard apart from repentance. The blessing of God and all

that it entails such as protection, guidance, the meeting of material needs, and more is contingent on His people leading a life in accordance with the commandment to love God and neighbor.

Joel made this clear when he spoke these words from the Lord: “Yet even now return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil (Joel 2: 12-13).”

Pentecost: The Coming of the Holy Spirit

What would result from heartfelt repentance? Ultimately the world would experience an outpouring of the Spirit of God upon the earth. Cleary Joel prophesized of a time his hearers would never see since Pentecost occurred many centuries after the book was written. But note how the moral exhortations, particularly the call to obey the commandments of God, remain timeless including the implication that disobedience to God’s law invites judgment while repentance can forestall it. St. Peter, in his first sermon on the day of Pentecost, said:

Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2: 36-39).

The same holds true today. When authentic repentance is made, those who have betrayed our Lord will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. At times it takes calamity, distress, and disaster in order for people to sense their loss when God has been pushed away and dependencies on persons and things other than God have been developed. An inner metanoia — a turning of the mind and heart has to take place for God’s restoration – His salvation – to be appropriated.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates the process, particularly how crisis can foster true self-awareness so that the idolatry of inordinate dependencies are broken:

(A)nd he (the prodigal son) began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said … I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you … ” (Luke 15: 14-18).

Mental health clinicians working with people suffering from various addictions such as alcoholism, drugs, gambling and sex report that “hitting bottom” often the beginning of healing (Morelli, 2006). How far down do nations have to fall before they see themselves in the swill of sin and initiate repentance so that their healing might occur?

Social restoration begins with the strengthening of families

A nation is only as strong as its families and any restoration of cultural stability will occur only if we work to make families stronger. Joel’s prophesy, repeated in St. Peter’s sermon on Pentecost that God would, ” … will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters … ” (Joel 2:28-32, Act 2:14-21).

Sons and daughters are found in families, and the family is the mikree ecclesia or “small Church” the Church Fathers told us. The family is where societal values are handed down from one generation to the next. For most of us, it is the first and most important place to light the candle of faith and obedience to God since our family members are our most immediate neighbors.

Christian parents in particular (even though the commandments of God are given to all people) must model the love of Christ in their family. They must become vessels of love to their children, and in so doing enable the Spirit of God to work among them. This is confirmed by the prayers read at the wedding service (which, in a sense, ordains the couple to proper parenthood) where they are charged to give their children the fear of God and a good education in His ways. The father must model Christ the Good Shepherd while the mother models the devotion of the Theotokos (Mary, the mother of God) to Christ in their relationships with their children.

Imagine if the level of repentance we are exhorted to practice by the Prophet Joel and St. Peter were practiced in the home. Self-reflection and active engagement with the commandments of God would become part of the family culture with far

reaching implications. Sons and daughters would understand why sexual abuse was wrong (Morelli, 2005a), or why caring for the body and the large environment in the appropriate ways is necessary. The answer to moral questions that bedevil society like abortion or euthanasia would be clear.

Further, children would intuitively recognize the absence of God and moral virtue in popular entertainment. (When was the last time you saw a main or even secondary character in a movie or on television portrayed as going to Church or even remotely religious?) They can develop compassion for the poor around us – clearly a directive by God as indicated in Matthew 25 – such as the plight of immigrants or the religiously oppressed in other lands.

The Prophet Joel called out to the people of Judah for a collective transformation of their hearts. The change of heart of one person is a change of the world. But any transformation first requires that the self-centeredness and self-indulgence which replaces obedience to the commandments of God be confessed and repudiated. The love of objects that have replaced authentic love of God – the idols (again, using scriptural terminology) must be torn down.

Such transformation must occur from within the person. It cannot be imposed from the outside. Any program or system, be it media centered, political, even theocratic, will fail. The Gospel of Christ (which is the source and origin of any transformation since the preaching of the Gospel reveals Christ the healer of persons) must be preached without coercion and compulsion, just as the Prophet Joel foretold and the Apostle Peter accomplished.

A call to radical love

I have a simple understanding of the Gospel of Christ. If someone is in need, whether they be Jew or Greek, American or Mexican, black or white, rich or poor, enslaved or free, Jesus tells us that we are obligated to care for them. Law and politics, while important, have only a secondary importance. The primary law is the Law of God, and the essential precept of God’s law is the commandment to love. Any legal precept, political boundary, or social convention that violates that sacred precept must be ignored.

Take the Good Samaritan for example. Did Jesus teach that the Samaritan, hated by the Jews, should first ask for the passport or question the legality of the man who fell to robbers before he reached out to help him? Jesus, asking a lawyer what the commandments of God are, heard this response from him:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

“And he (Jesus) said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.”

“But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10: 27-37).

One reason why Christians must think more deeply about these issues is that the communications revolution has expanded our neighborhood. My neighbor is not only my spouse, the waiter who serves my lunch, or the mechanic who fixes my car. He is also the oppressed Sudanese, the terror victims of Beslan, or the suffering children of the tsunami disasters. Technology has increased our responsibilities.

Monks in the earlier times practiced such “politic-blind” charity. St. Benedict, in his Rule of St. Benedict written over 1,500 years ago, instructed his novices that even if a guest were Jew or Muslim, they “are to be welcomed as Christ.” St. Basil taught that hospitality extends to Christian and non-Christian alike. His Long Rule states:

Is it a secular person who has arrived? Let him learn through actual experience what verbal instruction has not convinced him of … Although meager, food as the monks would have would be given to such a person … and let him be give a model

and pattern of frugal sufficiency in matters of food because of Christ gives us no cause for shame.

This hospitality (the Fathers used the term to mean love of the stranger) is both a commandment of God and a gift of the Holy Spirit. St. Basil continued:

From the Holy Spirit is the foreknowledge of the future, the comprehension of mysteries, the understanding hidden things, the distribution of graces, the heavenly way of life, association with angels, unending happiness, residence in God, the likeness of God and the highest of all things to be desired, to become God.

We have modern witnesses of the radical love who eschew the conventional boundaries of class and politics as well. Fr. Arseny was an Orthodox priest banished into a Soviet gulag where he suffered alongside the other prisoners. He is a modern saint. His biographer recounts that Fr. Arseny, upon seeing in spiritual visions the humanity of his fellow prisoners — some political, some brutal thieves and murderers, some prison officials and guards who tortured him in a Soviet labor camps — prayed: “O Lord, O my Lord! Do not leave them. Help them save them!”

His biographer continued:

Fr Arseny saw each person carried within himself a soul .. souls of some were afire with faith which kindled the people around them; the souls of others burned with a smaller but ever growing flame; others had only small sparks of faith and only needed the arrival of a shepherd to fan these sparks into a real flame. There were also people whose souls were dark and sad, without even the least spark of Light. “Lord! How can I leave them? How will I be without them? Do not leave all those who live here without your mercy help them!” And kneeling in the snow he prayed.

This is the depth of the transformation that the Prophet Joel is calling forth in us and all the peoples of the earth.

As an Orthodox priest and clinical psychologist, I have observed that the ability to bridge socially defined categories that we see in people like Fr. Arseny is typical of psychologically healthy functioning individuals. Maslow (1999) called such people “self actualizing” individuals. A major characteristic of self actualizers is what Maslow called “a democratic character structure.”

While Maslow’s work falls short of the standards of scientific psychology (Morelli, 2006) and should be treated only as a case study and hypothesis for future research, his observations in this area were consistent with Christian teaching. He

found that psychologically healthy persons are accepting of all people regardless of class, education, ethnicity, fame, wealth, and the other constituents that shape our perceptions about people and their social station.

Psychologically adjusted individuals don't act superior toward anyone, but are ready to learn from anyone. (This certainly falls within the definition of humility.) The self-actualizing person also distinguishes between means and ends, and right and wrong. They are guided by an ethical-value standard rather than expediency.

To have the spirit poured out on us means the presence of God would not only be known by each individual personally by illumining the center of each heart, but by all children in the total sense they are the people of God who come to see themselves as made in His image and drawn to one another in love. To do this we have respond to God's grace, call upon his name and repent. The Prophet first said, "And it shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered" (Joel 2: 32).

St. Paul, in the letter to the Romans further explained: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (10: 12-13).

But merely mouthing God's name ("Lord, Lord") is not enough. We must have the Spirit of God implanted in our hearts so the fruit of the spirit may emerge from us. St. Paul wrote that the fruit of the Spirit " … is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." When the fruit of the spirit is present, we have the Spirit in us and so is the prophesy of Joel fulfilled.

And what happens to those who call of God out of a duplicitous heart and have no authentic communion with Him, that is, nothing of God's Spirit with them? Matthew quoted Jesus saying:

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits. Not every one who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers” (Matthew 7: 19-23)

Our prayer ought to be that we are on the right side of this divide, experiencing in concrete ways the power, energy, and descent of the Holy Spirit that prophesized by Joel and conferred to all who believe in God in spirit and in truth.

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