

JOURNEYING THROUGH LENT.

Sunday 6th March 2022.

He chose to be one of us.

Scripture: Joel 2:12-13 & John
3:16

The Lent season has been celebrated by Christians for centuries – its purpose is to prepare oneself spiritually in preparation for receiving the greatest Easter gift of all – the resurrected Christ.



Lent is a time for discipline, confession and honesty – not because God is mean or fault-finding or finger-pointing, but because He wants us to know the joy of being cleaned out – ready for all the good things He now has in store.

But Lent is not all about the outward appearances – like saying I have given up coffee, or ice-cream or social media – just for the Lenten season, only to revert back after the season has finished.

What you give up or change during Lent is not about earning favour with God and saying – see God, I have given this up for Lent. It has been a struggle, but I will make it to the end of the 40 days – and then, you revert back to how you were beforehand.

God wants true repentance – it is about changing ourselves and preparing for something. We don't just get to tick a box – real fasting breaks the yoke of suffering and injustice.

Joel begins with the words – **the Lord says**. This is a phrase that frequently accompanies divine speeches in the books of the prophets.

Who was Joel? He was one of the minor prophets and his book of just 3 chapters can often be overlooked. We know that his name means “Yahweh is God.” His book contains both warnings of judgement and promises of salvation.

Joel shares God’s gracious invitation – ***Turn to me now while there is time.***

The message from Joel is – things are bad!

He reinforces what has already occurred - a swarm of locusts that invaded the land like a wildfire; invading armies that destroyed the land and the original readers may well have responded – Yeah, we know that story.

Let’s recap what had happened back then and see how it might apply to us today.

Solomon built a temple but he used slave labour and acquired his money through bad political allegiances.

The people rebelled, the nation split, the northern kingdom started worshipping golden calves to replace the temple of God.

The leaders in Jerusalem, who were filled with greed, gluttony and violence, introduced foreign idols into the Temple.

A swarm of Empires swooped in on the nation – the Assyrians destroyed the Kingdom of Israel; the Babylonians took over, and completely destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple; the Persians came in but allowed some of the people to return to their demolished homeland – but nothing was ever the same.

Things were bad and ugly.

But the people still had missed the point. They continued to turn their hearts away from God and time was running out before destruction came upon them.

What about us today?

Even if we go back to a few years we may say, like the original readers – yeah we know things are bad.

We've experienced wildfires, floods, droughts, hurricanes, a pandemic that has led to a yo-yo of lockdowns and restrictions and I won't even mention our political leaders.

But the words from God to Joel and the people at that time and for us today is: turn back to Me, repent and be saved.

Lent is about change – not changing the outward appearances, but the inward self – our hearts.

The original readers would tear their clothes when in mourning, sit in the dust of the street and all who passed knew they were in deep sorrow and anguish. Today, many wear black to funerals to state that same thing.

God doesn't really care about religious ceremonies or being in a church building or undertaking various rituals – they are all on the outside.

God wants us to tear our hearts open – not literally of course. But to wash our hearts clean with our tears of remorse and grief. Fasting is only beneficial if it serves others, not just the person doing it.

Giving up something or changing yourself can be challenging. So while you think about what you may give up or change, let's see what the example to us is from Jesus.

What did Jesus Give up for Us?

Timelessness – Jesus swapped eternity for calendars. The Bible tells us God is “beyond our understanding! The number of His years is past finding out (Job 36:26). There is no moment when God was not God, for He is eternal.

Boundlessness – Jesus gave up being a spirit to live in a body. One moment He was a boundless spirit, the next moment He was flesh and bones.

Sinlessness – Jesus became sin for us. An object that symbolizes the consequences of sin in humanity's heart is a thornbush (Gen 3:17-18; Numbers 33:55; Proverbs 22:5 and Matt 7:16).

Jesus was crowned – with a crown of thorns which represented a picture of the fruit of our sin that pierced His heart.

A crown is normally a symbol of honour and authority, given as a mark of consecration for a priest and a sign of sovereignty in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the apostle Paul acknowledged the crowns given to athletes as symbols of their victory and reward.

However, these crowns were made of precious metals and sometimes adorned with gems. A number of bands around the crown often indicated the number of territories over which a king had dominion.

So what might a crown of thorns symbolize about the source of Jesus' authority as both priest and king? Over what did His crown give Him dominion?

The Roman soldiers intended their crown of thorns to be a means of physical torture and humiliation but God utterly transformed it – a mock crown of pain and shame became a true crown of victory and glory.

John 3:16 states: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life.

What were the implications for the original hearers – God’s judgement if they continued to turn away and disobey Him.

One of the most significant promises in all of the Old Testament is written in Joel as he describes a future day of salvation for the people of God. He states that on that day the Lord would pour out His Spirit on all people. This prophecy was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost as we read in the book of Acts.

Are our hearts fully cleansed to welcome the power of the Holy Spirit? What are the implications for us if we decline the gift of the cross and Jesus’ sacrifice for us – God’s judgement?

We need to decide who we want to be in charge of our present plans and our eternal destiny – ourselves or Christ?

Lent is a spring-cleaning of the soul that gives us permission to take seriously the areas of our lives in which we fall short, feel defeated or have grown cold.

Just like a fire needing lots of kindling to spark it – so we need Lent to spark our desire to return to God with a whole heart.

The original people’s only hope and our only hope is in the merciful character of the Lord. God’s desire is not to punish but to forgive and restore all peoples back to Him.

This Lent season I invite you to embrace this moment as a time to turn even deeper into the heart of God. Things are BAD But God is GOOD. It is about how aligned our hearts are with the heart of God. Do we flow with grace, compassion and loyal love? Are we slow to anger and quick to forgive? If society worked along these lines we would have SHALOM.

Lord,

Let everything I do this day and in this season of Lent
come from You, be inspired by You.

I long to be closer to You.

Help me to remember that nothing is important in my life
unless it glorifies You in some way.

It's so easy to get caught up in the day to day of my life and keep saying,

"Tomorrow, I will spend more time in prayer,"

but now my longing meets Your love and I want to do it now.

Help me to rely on You for help.

The prayer asks You that I reach perfection.

Please, Lord, remind me that "perfection"
isn't the crazy, "successful" way I try to live my life,
but a perfection of my most authentic, real self.

My "perfection" might be holding my many flaws in my open hands,
asking You to help me accept them.

Heal me, Lord, and help me to find You in the darkness of my life.
Let me reach out in this darkness and feel Your hand and love there to
guide me.