

“Joy has been put to shame”: Insights from Joel for untangling life’s messes

Robyn McPhail

With this chapter I offer a contribution to our “Thinker’s Guide to Sin” for thinkers making a living on the land. For my starting point is rural life and finding livelihood from land and sea. Living with the variables of weather, markets, and politics is itself an act of faith and to survive and thrive there is no option but to trust in the ways of God’s world – however this might be expressed by different people – and do our best to “till and keep” the land (Genesis 2:15).

But there are things that happen and things we do which hold us back from God’s good life, and the task is to speak of what goes wrong in a way that makes a difference for rural people. I have puzzled over the church’s traditional terminology and, given that the word *sin* seems to be pointing to what does damage, creates isolation, and quashes the life-spirit, I regret that it has proved of little use to our contemporary rural context. Based on past experience of church, many rural people have presumed that sin is an entirely individual and personal matter, with a suspicion that the church institution uses it for purposes of social control. If not as extreme as that, the church’s ways and topics for conversation and preaching have seemed so disconnected from daily concerns that the church and its faith have been reckoned to be irrelevant.

Rural context

When rural people are asked about their life, concerns about soil and water usually top the list – increasing competition for water, degraded waterways, corporatisation of land (e.g. large holdings for dairy farming), crop monoculture (e.g. vineyards in Marlborough) and urban competition for land especially around major cities and in iconic landscapes. Human well-being is equally a worry – alcohol, drugs, mental illness, schooling, transport costs, migrant labour, unemployment, and the absence of youth within the community. The weather also features, as its unpredictability has always been a challenge, but indications of climate change are now an additional concern. Markets are also by nature unpredictable, and the now globalised consumer debt-model makes rural people feel more and more vulnerable to big financial players. Farmers feed cities and cities provide rural income, but questions about food supply and humane farming methods, environmental sustainability and food justice (e.g. the *stolen harvest* for bio-fuels) reveal a skewing of this mutuality between city and country. The urban/rural relationship faces misunderstanding in both directions, with the cultural gap not helped by the life-style circle around cities, where farmers live and work sometimes noisily alongside commuters whose community remains the city and the country their quiet refuge. Greater mobility, plus access to information technology and world-wide-web communication, means that urban culture is now part of rural life and is impacting upon core values and neighbourhood relationships that have sustained rural communities in the past.

At times it feels like a tangled mess. There are so many factors involved in sustainable farming and healthy rural communities that, when changes and pressures come from a variety of directions, it is hard to untangle the various threads and discern what is best for the future. It is easy to get trapped within the complexity of issues of world markets, the value of the dollar, government regulations, family needs and expectations, and the weather. Isolation, anxiety, a sense of *us versus them*, and feelings of inadequacy are part of this tangled mess. The cause of the mess is both natural and human, both a case of *it happens* and the result of human beings making choices. And like lengths of twine cut from hay bales, not carefully gathered up but left lying in the paddock (or worse still bits of fencing wire), this mess does damage to on-going life for the land community – animals and humans and their machinery.

At the personal level, it is people's relationships that get damaged in the tangle, relationships with other people and with the land, and with something deeper which the prevailing language of economics cannot compute. The remedy for this *sin* is some means to repair damage and restore relationship. And contrary to popular expectation among rural people there are healing remedies to be found in the church's greatest treasure. The Bible contains life-giving voices to help heal the wounds given and received as human beings try to live by the resources of the land.

Text as window

Many narratives in the biblical text relate directly to life on the land. Although separated in time and space from 21st century Aotearoa New Zealand, issues of relationship between people and land community, people and other people, are sufficiently timeless that particular narratives offer a window through which to view contemporary concerns. Dialogue between text and context opens up perspective and insight into practical issues and their deeper spiritual dimensions. Consider, for example, the story of Cain and Abel as a tale of two farmers who have quite different seasons – a good year for Abel's stock, a poor one for Cain's crops. Coping with hard seasons and seeing others do well is not easy. One needs to learn to live with it, process feelings of failure and resentment and realise there will be another season. Other examples are Genesis 2-3 which grapples with issues of food supply and production difficulties, the opening verses of Hosea 4 with the hearing they give to concerns for water and soil, and many Gospel texts that feature food and the hinterlands.

It is the story of Joel that I use as my detailed example for reinterpreting sin and its remedy for the contemporary scene. I will re-tell the story here with one eye on current scholarship and one eye on what it is like trying to survive on the land.

A plague of locusts strike, the land is devastated, the people ruined. "Joy has been put to shame," says Joel (1:12)¹ and calls on the people to return to their God. Joel is silent on who or what is to blame, naming no wrong-doing facing judgment.

In addition to this locust plague, the catastrophe is also described as drought and enemy invasion. The contemporary rural context brings to this text familiarity with a variety of damaging biological pests and climate crises ranging from drought to floods. The enemy invasion is very descriptive of economic colonisation, the power of large corporations and international finance expanding their influence and especially calling the shots in economically vulnerable communities.² In the book of Joel, plague, drought, and enemy invasion have resulted in a big drop in production, with harsh economic consequences and damage to land and waterways. For our context also.

For Joel's time, this meant the people did not carry out their routine religious sacrifices. For us these circumstances often mean we cannot afford to attend to our whole-person well-being. Under economic pressure, rural people withdraw. Even if the primary cause is beyond their control, farmers feel a failure when land, stock, or the bank balance suffers. Anxiety, self-doubt, and often depression take hold and people shut themselves off from others, from community gatherings, and even from the farm they love. The joy of living with land and community has been put to shame.

Joel's advice is to get together and share the sorrow. Return to God and lament this suffering that has hit, speaking openly and honestly about what has happened – "rend your hearts and not your clothing" (2:13). Communal lament brings out the shame into common ground in an environment that is safe because it is shared. No longer isolated but gathered, the understanding that they count for something is restored. Shame is thereby turned back into honour and strength returns, in relation to others in the

community and with the land that gives livelihood. “Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice,” says the Life-restorer (2:21). “I will repay you... And my people shall never again be put to shame.” (2:25-26)

The story reveals another dimension to the disaster. From the opening verses of Joel the land calls on its inhabitants to grieve for its loss and to lament with it. Human inhabitants are the only ones that can speak on its behalf and they have gone silent because their world of concern has shrunk. Although this land has been their daily companion as they work in partnership with it for livelihood, their own problems have become so all-encompassing that they have self-medicated with alcohol (1:5) and closed themselves off from the land as well as from one another.

Honour God and reclaim the honour that you have as people of the land. And let yourselves believe that the disaster of the present time *will* end (2:26). The locusts will die, the drought will end, the enemy invasion will be driven off, and the land will be restored. Your shame will be history and you will have a future: God’s spirit will make sure of that (2:28-29).

Insights

The key insight of this re-telling of the story of Joel is the question it asks, not about blame, but about shame. Blame is the popular mode of analysis: who did what wrong? Mistakes will have been made, and better options could have been taken, but to ask only this isolated question *who done it?* functions to disempower the situation further. Treating the tangled mess as fault, and nothing but fault, removes it from the context in which the alienation, hurt, and error has happened. A person justifiably fights back because one’s own error is only part of the situation, or alternatively feels guilty and takes on the whole weight of responsibility. Extracted from the constraints of a sin-judgement-repentance-blessing interpretation of Joel, which confined it within the grand narrative of personal salvation, this story enters into conversation with the rural context and its primary barriers to good life.

Joy put to shame describes the collapse of one’s world when, for example, employment ceases through redundancy during economic retrenchment. There is no reason to blame oneself and yet consistently people will say they feel they have failed. “If I’d done things differently it wouldn’t have happened. I’ve let down my family. Other people haven’t lost their jobs – I’m not as good as them.” One feels ashamed, withdraws into oneself, and gets increasingly anxious over money and the future. Hard seasons on the land – whether the cause is international markets, government requirements or the weather (the rural *unholy trinity*) – feature similar dynamics of joy put to shame and shame projected as self-blame. In both urban and rural contexts, this projected blame may also be directed outwards, for example, at the markets, the government, etc. etc. Naming the problem as shame, we short-circuit these paralysing dynamics and identify something that can be remedied.

The remedy is a call to lament, that is, to talk about what is wrong and grieve for what could have been. Lament is a word that holds together both what I am sorry for and what sorrows me. It begins with the raw experience that the situation is not as it could be, that it hurts, and that we have got ourselves into a real tangle. Also it does not move too quickly to draw a line between who is innocent and who is to blame. When we re-frame trauma or crises in terms of feelings like shame and respond with a call to lament, it becomes possible to hold together error and hurt, and to acknowledge the range of factors involved in any situation.

Lament provides space for identifying the aspects of life’s tangled messes that are beyond our control as well as mistakes made that could have been different. The Korean concept of *han*

captures this former aspect well and recognises the accumulation of untreated hurts as a significant factor in alienating and disabling the human spirit. By lamenting both sides – being hurt and causing harm – we embrace pain, in ourselves and in others.

What is more, for farmers to lament with the land, as Joel urges, means they can embrace the pain of seeing the land in a wounded state, keep company with it, and care for it as one does with a suffering loved one at their bedside. To withdraw is to cease to care, to act as if independent and in no need of the land, and thereby continue to contribute to the tangled mess by shutting out a relationship that is vital of livelihood. In other words it is broken relationships that are at the centre of this contemporary reframing of what the tradition has called sin. The process from sin to salvation therefore will involve movement to restoring relationship, by acknowledging the brokenness and looking for options for healing.

Shame infects relationships through its deficit of self-worth and its susceptibility to disconnect from others. When blame is projected entirely on oneself there is no room for considering how others, and how the simple facts of the events, have contributed to what happened. The particulars of the situation are viewed in reference to one's self as an individual alone, effectively separating oneself off from others, from one's physical environment, and from any source of strength or prospects for the future. Such isolation has a sense of belonging to no one and to no place.

Lament in practice

The call to communal lament is a call to reverse this propensity to disconnect oneself. Having hunkered down at home to struggle on privately, people are called to gather and be community again. Some examples may help picture what is being envisaged and its relevance to our context. In Canterbury, annual Harvest Services at church when it has been a poor season have been promoted as "Harvest Lament" and provide an opportunity to name the struggles of the season. Community forums during a bad drought have brought together people who had not found reason or courage to leave the farm for a number of weeks. They knew that in the church it would be safe to talk about their lives and they were personally invited. In Northland, the Boyd Remembrance in December 2009 drew together descendants of survivors of those on board the merchant ship *The Boyd*, sacked by the home people of Whangaroa Harbour in 1809, and descendants of those local people. Common ground is a longing for healing; the process of sharing stories gave space for lament and for whakawhanaungatanga – relationship building. An urban example is the Erebus memorial event held in Auckland in October 2009 where chief executive Rob Fyfe said that "Air New Zealand inevitably made mistakes and undoubtedly let down people directly affected by the tragedy" of the Mt Erebus crash. "I can't turn the clock back, I can't undo what has been done but as I look forward I'd like to start the next step of that journey by saying sorry."³

A gathering to lament begins by holding the painful tangle as an undifferentiated whole. The pain that needs healing – sorrow and sorry intermingled – seeks words to bring it to speech. As talk flows, it naturally turns to sharing strategies for coping with the trouble, which in turn present options for the future. For as grieving progresses, attention turns to the next season. This is not so much *getting closure* on the past as in fact not closing up too soon. By allowing lament to take the time it needs, future openings start to reveal themselves in the midst of the past's loss. By reclaiming the social and spiritual rituals of our community (in Joel's terms "returning to God") we are enabled to respond rather than simply react to our circumstances. When we talk with our neighbour of our shame and of theirs, we instinctively seek ways to turn it back into honour and rebuild confidence.

Relationships: disconnection and reconnection

This focus on shame has led us to consider the breaking of relationships as our central issue in relation to wrong-doing and what goes wrong for life on this planet. Disconnection has a deadly effect on living beings. Broken relationships mean a weakening of spirit and, at worst, a spirit that is destructive of self and others. For example, a significant factor in the contemporary struggle for Māori well-being is seen to be a spiritual malaise, triggered in large part by people's disconnection from land and spiritual roots. We look at our young people and ask: does the tangled mess from the past have to keep being repeated in the next generation? Reconnection heals the shame and restores the honour (mana). Transformation is witnessed when people who re-occupy their home place work to rebuild their lives. They reconnect to the land, reconnect to one another, and discover the particular strength of being committed to live and work together with a common purpose.

For people who depend on land for livelihood (as for indigenous people), future well-being depends on a strong connection with the land and on being individuals forged together as community living with that land. "Land is not just real estate where the drama of salvation is played out" nor is the Bible's sole focus God and human beings.⁴ Consider how New Zealand ecologist the late Geoff Park described the development in 1890s New Zealand of the concept of "conservation 'estate', that is, pristine nature to be 'preserved' as national park or 'wilderness'."⁵ It is a notion that has no room for human inhabitants or for processes for living in interdependence with the land as whenua. If this conservation movement had not arisen when it did, large areas of forest that remain today would have succumbed to the project of cultivation. But both the cultivation of farm lands and the protection of wild areas stem from a perception of people and nature as separate.

For those who cultivate the land, this prevailing attitude to land as landscape, as real estate within which God's blessings are achieved, has not meant an absence of land care. Many New Zealand farmers still consider themselves stewards of land that is theirs only for a time. But their concept of stewardship sees them as *outsiders*, without the "intimacy, reciprocity and inhabitation"⁶ that first nations people have known, and that our re-telling of Joel opens up. As outsiders the balance is thrown out when disaster strikes: a default separateness makes individuals withdraw from the land's pain to focus on their own. Joel's call to return to God is a call to be related as *insiders* whose world cannot shrink to oneself alone, no matter how bad it gets. This means a shift from *landscape* as something we tame and take pride in (and feel shame when we fail) to *whenua* as partner for mutual health and livelihood.

On the land, what does damage, creates isolation, and quashes the life-spirit is both intensely spiritual and thoroughly practical. When things go wrong it is like a tangled mess. *It's hard to be green when you're in the red* is a phrase I have heard repeatedly at farmers' meetings – a succinct summary of rural life worldwide. This is not saying it is impossible, but that the issues are so complex and entangled that only an integrated approach can work to turn tangles into relationships. What goes wrong – and what we do wrong – stems from a fragmentation of the different aspects of human life. Economic survival, viable local communities working the common good, and ecological mutuality are all indispensable to sustaining the places and people that feed us. To speak in terms, not of the church's traditional word *sin*, but of fragmentation and broken relationships, and of both what gives us grief and what we regret, makes a difference in enabling 21st century people to see how the mess might untangle. We can play our part through the process of lament and intentional reconnecting. Our relationship partners – people, land community, and the keeper of the interconnected whole we call God – will, from their side, call us back to good life. This approach also makes a difference because we gain a resource for rural life we thought was irrelevant. The Bible's rich supply of agrarian themes and rural narratives off windows through which re-frame life on the land, to recognise the dangers of fragmentation, and through healing lament see shame turned to joy.

¹ A translation argued for by Ronald A. Simkins in “‘Return to Yahweh’: Honor and Shame in Joel”, in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993), 46-7

² See *Cry from the Heart*, International Rural Church Association Conference, 2007 (Go to www.irca.net.nz, Conference Reports), especially John Ikerd’s presentation.

³ *The New Zealand Herald*, Friday 23 October 2009.

⁴ Laurie J. Braaten, *Earth Story in Psalms and Prophets*, *Earth Bible* 4, 188. For further reading see this five Volume series *The Earth Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000-2002), and Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

⁵ Geoff Park, *Theatre Country: Essays on landscape and whenua* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), 81

⁶ *Ibid.*, 127