

## RETELLING THE NARRATIVE OF THE PROPHET JOEL

Do you know the story in the book of Joel? A plague of locusts strike, the land is trashed and the people devastated, shut off from their God. The assumption has been that Joel's message is to do with sin, judgment, repentance and then blessing. The problem is that Joel makes no mention of what they've done wrong. All he does is call on the people to return to their God, and he offers them hope that the catastrophe will end. Joel is a prophet of encouragement.

He is also a prophet of honest realism. "Their joy has been put to shame," says Joel (1:12). Instead of inventing sins to account for the disaster, we make more sense of this prophet's story if we go with his silence on who and what is to blame and think about the situation that has turned joy to shame.

There has been catastrophe on the land, with mention of a locust plague described also in images of drought and enemy invasion. We can relate to that: many Australians know the first one and there are plenty of other biological pests we live with (clover root weevil, fly strike, varroa mite...); we all know the second – drought and other climate crises (some of us do floods more often); and the enemy invasion is in fact very descriptive of the effects of globalisation and corporate power, what John Ikerd at our 2007 International Rural Church conference called "economic colonisation".<sup>1</sup>

These things have resulted in a big drop in production, with harsh economic consequences and damage to land and waterways. Then and now.

For Joel's time, that meant the people couldn't and/or wouldn't carry out their routine religious sacrifices. The supplies for sacrifice were not available and likely all energy and resources were being used for survival. For us these circumstances often mean that we cannot afford to attend to our social, emotional and spiritual well-being. In hard situations, rural people withdraw into themselves and experience anxiety, self-doubt and often depression. Even if the major circumstances are outside their control individual farmers feel a failure when land, stock or the bank balance suffers. This sense of shame shuts a person off from the farm they love, from others and the communal experience of God and, in the extreme, shuts a person off from God. The joy of a good life with land and community has been put to shame.

Joel's advice to them is to get together and share their sorrows. Return to your God and lament with God this suffering that has come at you from outside. Let yourselves lament openly and honestly – rend your hearts as well as your garments - and, by doing this, you will get yourselves connected again physically and spiritually as a community. Communal lament brings the shame out into common ground in an environment that is safe because it is shared. Shame is thereby turned back into honour and to a positive pride that goes with knowing one belongs. One's strength and potential returns – in relationship with others in the community and with the land that gives livelihood.

The story also reveals there's another dimension to the disaster. Right from the start it is the land that calls on all its inhabitants to lament: to grieve for its loss and to weep with it for the disastrous state they are in now. Its human inhabitants, the only ones that can speak on its behalf, have gone silent: it seems that their world of concern has shrunk. Although this land is their daily companion as they work in partnership with it to produce life and livelihood, their own problems have become so all-encompassing that they have 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 hear words of hope that the disaster of the present time *will* end. As Joel puts it, God will destroy the locusts, end the drought, drive off the enemy invasion and restore the land so that your shame will

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<sup>1</sup> John Ikerd, "The Role of the Rural Church in Sustaining Rural Communities", in *Cry from the Heart*, International Rural Church Association Conference, 2007. Go to [www.irca.is](http://www.irca.is) and click on Conference Reports.

be history. It happens. The Day of the Lord encompasses the worst disasters that we face but it is also about hope. There will be a future: God's spirit will make sure of that.

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