**Joel 2:21-28 Harvest Festival**

You know what one of the most wonderful things about living in this part of the world is? It rains. It rains a LOT! That was one of the major things I noticed when we moved here. I noticed how green the grass is, how lush the vegetation is, and how prolific the birdlife is. We started a veggie garden in the backyard – but take your eyes off it for a minute, and the plants just take over the garden beds! It’s really lush down here!

Jay & I have been in this area now for 18 months. Before that, we lived on a 66 acre property in Kalkite – in Monaro country. For most of the 5 years we lived there, the Monaro was in drought. The farmers out there were doing it so tough – it was heartbreaking. Dams were dry and cracked, the paddocks bare dirt, and stock had to be hand fed and water trucked in. Many farms just didn’t make it. They had to be sold. It was tragic. We didn’t work the land, but we had a few horses which we had to send away because our dams dried up and there was no feed in the paddocks. It was SO barren.

The situation on the Monaro reminds me of today’s reading from the Old Testament.

Through the prophet Joel, God was speaking to the Jewish nation of Judah. They’d been doing it tough as well. They had been devastated by a severe drought and a massive locust plague. It’s hard to imagine how the people survived.

I have a friend in Mildura who described the locust plague they had out there a couple of years ago. She couldn’t believe how quickly the locusts decimated every every living plant. The crops, gardens, trees – all completely devoured.

Joel saw the devastation of the land as a harbringer or sign, if you like, of a day to come when God would bring all things to a close; when the wicked would receive their just desserts, and those who were faithful to God would be blessed and restored.

The New Testament also talks of this day. It has various names – “the Day of the Lord” or the return of Jesus, or more colloquially, Judgement Day. It’s the day when all that is wrong and evil is vanquished, when all that is sick and broken is healed, and when those who love and serve God and invited to live with him in a NEW creation – one that is rich and abundant.

Joel calls on the people to change their ways; to stop ignoring God, and to return to him, and serve him. The call is the same in the New Testament. We need to come before God and ask his forgiveness for living our lives without any reference to him, and to turn back to him and serve him.

Then he says, they can expect God’s blessing. He says this to them:

“Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the Lord has done great things.

Be not afraid, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches.

Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before.

The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.

"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten— the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm— my great army that I sent among you.

You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed.”

God promises a time will come when all will be set to rights. A time when will be an end to the drought and famine. There will be plenty to eat and life will be full of abundance and blessing.

That sounds good, doesn’t it? For those of us who believe the Scriptures, this is a reality we look forward to. But it is conditional. It is conditional upon us returning to God. It is conditional upon us recognising that Jesus Christ died on the cross to deal with the mess we have made of this world, and to deal with our own sin. It’s conditional upon us giving Jesus his rightful place in our lives as our Lord.

Christians believe that Jesus will return, and that all that is broken and hurting will be healed and set to rights. In place of sorrow and tears, there will be abundance and blessing. God promises it for those who love him.

Meanwhile, we live on this fractured earth and must deal with its extremes and its imbalances. And so it is that countries like East Africa are experiencing drought and famine, while other parts of the world have so much that they throw away enough food to feed entire nations.

Part of our calling while we inhabit this earth, is to be agents of God’s blessing to those who are in need. Those who have an abundance are called to share their abundance with those who have little or nothing. Those who are rich are called to share their wealth with those who are poor. Those who are healthy are called to help those who are ill.

There is enough produce on the earth to feed the entire planet. Sadly though, 20% of the people consume 80% of the resources. This injustice is something we need to address – not only for the sake of the poor, but for the sake of the planet as well.

A harvest festival is a joyous occasion. As we rejoice in the abundance of God’s provision poured out upon us, we are given a glimpse of the abundance and blessing that will characterise his Kingdom. As we give thanks for all that he has given us, we recognise his love for us, and as we rise to the challenge of sharing our abundance with those who do not have what we have, we are reflecting something of the character of God himself.

I pray that today we will indeed be thankful for all that God has blessed us with – and not just for produce – but all his blessings to us: thanks that we live in a peaceful and prosperous nation; thanks that we have rooves over our heads, sanitation, power and running water; thanks that we have enough to eat; thanks that we have families and friends.

And I pray that today, we would be mindful of those who live on the other end of the spectrum. May we be moved to not just be generous today, but to develop a spirit of generosity which can change our world.

Let’s pray.