



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Joel 2:12-17

Background of the reading

The book of Joel originated most probably after 515 BC after the Judeans returned from exile in Babylon. As I said previously in sermons: the exile to Babylon happened because they were unfaithful to God. But when you read the book of Joel you get the impression they still had not learnt their lesson. The prophet is urging them to return to God anew and mend what is broken namely their attitude towards God!

In those days they used to give great importance to ritual mourning by throwing ash on their heads and tearing their outer garments. But now the prophet is saying to them: it must come from the inside. They must honestly mean it and walk with God again. They must leave behind their old ways and start afresh. They must again repent and live their lives in full obedience to God. Everyone must feel the urgency of the matter and at once leave whatever they are busy with and use the time to return to God. This must not be gestures of outwardly show but an inwardly return brought along by God's Holy Spirit. It must be a genuine and true commitment to God.

It may not be too late. He says: "Who knows"! God is forgiving, merciful and just. He might forgive them and bless them again with His powerful presence.

It is matter of urgency. They must declare a special day for the Lord. They must blow the *shophar*/rams horn or trumpet on the hill called Zion in Jerusalem where the temple was situated. The *šhōphār* played a very important role in Old Testament history. When Israel was at Mount Sinai, it was a strong blast on the *šhōphār* that was the signal for Israel to approach. The arrival of the new moon and new year was heralded by a

signal from the *shophar*, as was the year of Jubilee (according to Leviticus 25:9). It played a vital part in Israel's expressions of praise. It was important in civil and military affairs as well. It announced a new king. It served as a bugle for signals in battle. It was important in the fall of Jericho and Gideon's defeat of the Midianites.

They must gather in the presence of God, each and everyone regardless of age - from the babies to the bride and groom in the wedding chamber. In those days a groom received a year's leave from military service or any other duties to spend the time with his newly wedded wife!

The call to the priests is distinctive in this section in that it singles them out for a special task—they were to intercede for the nation. It is not clear that there is specific significance to the place between the porch and the altar except that it would have been a large enough area to hold a fairly significant number of priests. The priests called on Yahweh to uphold the covenant and not abandon his people. The idea behind this is that God's name would be disgraced before the nations if he allowed his own people to fall. More than that, this was an appeal for mercy. I do not specifically like the NIV translation of "a byword among the nations". The phrase can *only* mean, "Do not let the nations rule over them." The call to repentance in 2:12–17 both looks back to the locusts and looks ahead to conquest by an enemy army. The prayer that the nations do not rule over them shows that Joel had already anticipated such an event in the prophecies of 2:1–11.

Joel is worried that a second exile would totally destroy them but trusts God's judgment to do whatever He pleases; hoping that God's mercy and love will prevail, which is promised in the next chapter of Joel.

Reflection and meaning of the reading

The text verse for the sermon is: "Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

In the old days when God was still relevant to our society people might have asked "where is Scotland's God, meaning the Almighty God? Nowadays his name is only used in a context of violence and aggression, usually as a swear word! It is almost as if people think there is no God at all. It is shocking that people do not respect Him or his Holy Name. I am shocked to see that there is even a comedy show at the Edinburgh Festival called: "christ on a bike: the second coming". Critics call it: '**Hilarious**'; '**The best comic of his generation**'.

Without going into much detail, by just reading the summary of the comedy on their website, one gets the impression that it is all about how the NT does not make sense and that Christians are idiots! It seems as if there is a constant threat against Christians – always depicting us as “idiots” who have it all wrong. Why?

Well I think a few reasons might be because we act as people who do not know right from wrong or because of our lack of moral values or our inability to love everyone as God loved us. Maybe we forgot about God ourselves and became our own gods, our houses our churches and our knowledge our trust and hope!

But the Lord God speaks to us too this morning: we must come to a standstill and repent and change every action/commitment/thought where we forget God. Maybe the time has come for us too to blow the *shophar* to give people the opportunity to humble themselves before God and return to Him. We must ask ourselves this morning: have we also deserted God through our busy lives and all our commitments?

And if we have, there is still time to make a U turn to God. There is still time to show people with our witnesses of hope and peace that there is a God who is full of mercy. There is still time to touch the lives of the fallen, the weary, the sick, the marginalized with our deeds of love that we received from God in Jesus Christ. There is still time to make a difference wherever we might find ourselves. There is still time to tell a seeker that God has already found them. There is still time to offer the peace of God to those in distress. There is still time to pray for those who are lost. There is still time to change our hearts because ritual repentance, however fervently carried out, is of no use if the heart is unchanged.

There is still time to tell the old, old story to someone that is waiting to hear of the Mighty workings of God through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. There is still time to convince others that Jesus Christ is not a modern day human being riding on a bike, but God's only Son who is our redeemer and saviour. He does not need any of our “bikes” to ride on. He does not need our money. He wants our hearts, our attitude and commitment to Him. He wants us to obey and trust him with everything we have!

So let us use the 10th of the 10th 2010 to show the world that we are willing to sacrifice and give God what already belongs to him, our time, our commitment of service and our changed hearts...

Let us blow the *shophar* that day and celebrate our relationship with God Almighty because He has shown us His mercy, love and grace through Jesus Christ's redemption on the cross!

Amen.