

The Valley of Jehoshaphat

Series: Joel

Date: 1 December 2024, 1st Sunday in Advent

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Joel 3, Revelation 20.11-21.5

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is the beginning of the church's year. It's a 4 week period all about looking forward, not to Christmas, but to Christ's second coming; not as a baby, but as the Judge. Belief in the day of judgement is a non negotiable of the Christian faith. We confess in the creeds that Jesus "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end." But this belief is one that many find difficult in wealthy white Western societies. We like to think that God, if he exists, is a God of love. But if he is a God of love, how could he judge people?

Well our text today, Joel 3 is all about the Day of Judgement, and it clearly answers that question: how could a loving God judge people? In fact I want to suggest that Joel 3 shows us why the Day of Judgement is actually a *good* thing, and something which we all want, whether you're a believer or not. We're going to have a look at 2 points: The Judgement of the Nations 1-16, and The Restoration of Creation 17-21. So let's get under way.

1-16 The Judgement of the Nations

First, a little recap of Joel so far. Joel's great theme is The Day of the Lord. This was a day when God would show up in judgement and salvation. Judgement upon his enemies and salvation for his people. In chapter 1 Joel saw in a devastating locust plague of his time the day of the Lord, where God came to judge his own people. In chapter 2 Joel saw a future day of the Lord like the locust plague of chapter 1, and so he called his nation to repent. In response God turned from this disaster and promised to restore their land. The day of the Lord would be for his people one of salvation, not judgement. God also promised that on that day he would send his Spirit upon all people.

Now in chapter 3 Joel's prophecy of that future day of the Lord continues. The chapter opens with that promise of restoration for God's people. Read with me verse 1.

In those days and at that time,

when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem,

But then, in verse 2 it moves to God's judgement upon the nations.

I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat means "Yahweh judges". The valley is mentioned again in verse 12, and there the point is clear:

‘Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat,
for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side.

We see the valley again in verse 14:

Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision!

For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.

Here, the decision is not so much a decision made by the nations, rather it is the valley where God will give his verdict as judge upon the nations.

Commentators disagree as to where this is, but more important than the location is that God will indeed judge the nations. That said, the traditional location ascribed to this valley is the Kidron valley with the temple just to the west, with the Mount of Olives on the east. This tradition is why a great Jewish graveyard lies in the Kidron valley to this day.

In verses 2-6 and 19 we see the reasons for God’s judgement upon the nations. The nations are brought to the valley of judgement and the picture is of a law court. Read with me verse 2.

There I will put them on trial
for what they did to my inheritance, my people Israel,
because they scattered my people among the nations
and divided up my land.

3 They cast lots for my people and traded boys for prostitutes;
they sold girls for wine to drink.

Now we start to see why the day of judgement might actually be something we want. The displacement of people through war, child slavery and sex trafficking. These are grave injustices that we see even today. Our media has constantly reported the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. But this week I read about the civil war going on in Sudan between the Arab Sudanese and African Sudanese. More than 11 million people have been displaced by this conflict. All kinds of atrocities are happening. It dwarfs what is going on in Gaza and Ukraine. International experts say this is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. It’s the largest displacement crisis. It’s the largest food security emergency.¹ We long for injustices like this to be put right and for those who perpetrate them to be brought to justice. At the same time the fact that conflicts like the civil war in Sudan are barely reported reminds us that human attempts at justice fall short. We’ve seen increasing frustration and

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<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-28/paramilitary-group-about-to-conquer-sudanese-city-el-fasher/104630112>

rage at the injustices we see in the world. But if we can draw any meaning from the conflict in Gaza it is this - that violence begets violence. Both sides have been wronged. They both need justice. But how can our passion for justice be honoured in a way that does not nurture our desire for blood vengeance? It is here that the promise that one day God will bring justice becomes incredibly powerful. If I don't have this belief, then I will take up the sword and join in the endless cycle of revenge and retribution. But if I believe that God will one day judge, then I can follow the apostle Paul's words,

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.²

The repeated refrain in the Old Testament is that the true and living God is a God who defends the cause of the orphan, the widow, the poor and the refugee.³ And texts like Joel 3 promise that one day God will bring to justice all who do such evils. This is how the book ends, in verse 21,

Shall I leave their innocent blood unavenged? No, I will not.

Joel also shows us the shape of God's judgement. Read with me verse 4.

Now what have you against me, Tyre and Sidon and all you regions of Philistia? Are you repaying me for something I have done? If you are paying me back, I will swiftly and speedily return on your own heads what you have done.

Here God's judgement is described according to the principle of *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That is a returning upon the offender what they have done. What we might call retributive justice. And so we read in verse 6 if Tyre and Sidon sold the people of Judah into slavery, in verse 8, their sons and daughters will be sold into slavery. Now, this is not a justification for slavery or revenge. Rather, it is more along the lines of what we read in Galatians 6.7: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." And second, this is judgement in the form of divine reversal, as Mary herself sings:

[God] has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
53 He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.⁴

And so we see in Joel 3:9-11 the nations preparing for war, gathering together to attack God's people. But the day of their attack turns out to be the day where God will judge them. Having

² Romans 12.19

³ Deuteronomy 10.18, Psalm 68.5, Psalm 146.9, Proverbs 22.22-23

⁴ Luke 1.52-53

failed to listen to God's word, on this day of the Lord, this day of judgement, this is how the nations will hear God's voice, verse 16:

The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem;
the earth and the heavens will tremble.

But for God's people, this day of judgement will be a day of salvation.

But the LORD will be a refuge for his people,
a stronghold for the people of Israel.

There is coming a day when God will judge all people and all nations. That day will be one where justice is done and the evil that people have done will be returned to them. The wicked will receive what is their due. For all who do not see justice in this life, this is cause for great hope. But Joel offers us a second picture of why the day of judgement is something for which we can hope. And that brings us to point 2.

17-21 The Restoration of Creation

In verse 18 Joel gives just a little glimpse of what lies in store on the other side of the day of judgement.

In that day the mountains will drip new wine,
and the hills will flow with milk;
all the ravines of Judah will run with water.
A fountain will flow out of the LORD's house
and will water the valley of acacias.

Back in chapter 1 the judgement of the locusts was followed by a drought. The vine had dried up and the people's joy had withered. Now after God's judgement upon the nations the abundance of his storehouses are released and the earth is renewed. Wine is a symbol of God's blessing and in the Old Testament was enjoyed at the celebration of the harvest. Hills that flow with milk recalls the description of the promised land, a land "flowing with milk and honey".⁵ The spring and autumn rains promised in Joel 2 have now gathered as streams in all the ravines of Judah. But the final line hints at something beyond a particularly good vintage. Have another read with me.

A fountain will flow out of the LORD's house and will water the valley of acacias. At first glance this seems an odd picture - how could you get a fountain to come out of the temple? This is one of those cool bits in the Bible where lots of images come together in the whole storyline of the Bible. Back in Genesis a river came out of Eden and watered the

⁵ Exodus 3.8

garden, and indeed turned into the great rivers of Mesopotamia - the Tigris and Euphrates. And in the middle of the garden was the tree of life.

Fast forward to Ezekiel 47. There Ezekiel prophesied that water would come out of the altar in the temple and flow out to the east and south. This water would turn into a river which would flow into the Dead Sea and turn its salt water into fresh and bring life where there was death. On the sides of the river would be fruit trees that would never wither, and their fruit would “serve for food and their leaves for healing.” It’s this river coming from the temple that Joel speaks about here in chapter 3. And the valley of acacias is, you guessed it, the Kidron valley, to the east of the temple, where you can still find acacias today. The prophet Zechariah also spoke of this river, as one that would cleanse people from sin and impurity.⁶

Fast forward again to Revelation 20. There we see the day of judgement, where the multitudes of Joel 3 stand before the judgement seat of God. Then there is the new heavens and the new earth, and the Holy City, the new Jerusalem comes from God to earth. And the one who is seated on the throne says, “See I am making everything new.” Then in chapter 22 we read these words:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb **2** down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.⁷

Here in John’s vision, what Joel only glimpsed has come to pass. On the other side of the day of judgement, there comes the new creation. All that is wrong with this world will be done away with. Every tear will be wiped away. All will be healed. Eden will be restored. All can drink from the river of life. Jesus says, “To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.”⁸ Isn’t this what you long for in your heart of hearts? This is the great hope God promises us. Hope for ourselves, hope for this world full of injustice and violence, hope for a broken and hurting creation. This is why the day of judgement is in fact good news.

The question for you and for me, is will that day be one of salvation or judgement? On that day we all will have to stand before God’s throne and give an account of our lives. But

⁶ Zechariah 13.1

⁷ Revelation 22.1-2

⁸ Revelation 21.6

Revelation tells us that on that day there will be two books that God will read: The book of the record of our deeds, And the book of life. For those whose names are written in the book of life, that day will not be one of condemnation and death, but one of vindication and life. And Jesus tells us in John 5 how we can find our names written in the book of life: "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged, but has crossed over from death to life." Jesus is in fact the Judge who on the cross was judged in our place, taking the punishment for our sin, so that we might receive his life. The question for each of us is will we hear and believe Jesus' words to us? Will you trust him? He alone will be the refuge on the day of judgement. As we place our faith and hope in Christ, we can then also live the life of love he calls us to here and now, and do all the good he has for us to do.