

Sometimes we in the church are in danger of over romanticising life. We believe with all our hearts in a faithful God, we believe in a God who works for our best, who promises much and so we see it almost as a betrayal of God to suggest that life is not as good as the eutopia we have come to hope for.

It's almost as if we were to admit that life is a struggle that somehow that would be a betrayal of God or a denial of his goodness. This means there is a real danger that we go through life with a false smile that covers up or denies the reality of what's really going on. I see this all the time, people suffering all kinds of hardships including sickness and bereavement, loved ones receiving palliative care and there is still this smile, this veneer that everything is good, that we aren't feeling the burden – and this is not the picture of life that scripture presents.

Harvest is one of those festivals we are in real danger of over romanticising. 7 years in Moneydig taught me that there are times when the harvest is anything but plentiful or easy. I have watched farmers struggle to find enough grass of all things to feed their animals with – silage becomes an incredibly expensive commodity. I've watched farmers endure real worry and loss because the weather has been unkind and potatoes are literally rotting in the ground, wheat and barley battered and destroyed by wind and rain, a cold summer and so there is no growth.

And yet, we come to harvest and present a children's picture book image of tractors in the field and crops in the barn, and everyone is smiling when the truth is exactly the opposite.

In the book of Joel Israel understands what it means to suffer the loss of a harvest. Such has been the extent of Israel's abandoning of God the prophet was warning of swarms of locusts and not just one swarm, but another one not just of locusts but great locusts and when they have passed the young locusts will come – the fields, the gardens, the countryside – everything will be stripped bare. Nothing will escape, so much so even the wild animals are going to cry out for something to eat.

Joel is clear in his book, the correct response to this total devastation is not to put on a smile and pretend everything is OK, it's not to blindly and robotically declare the goodness of God as though the locusts hadn't come. This is the kind of false worship that angered God in the first place. It was this saying one thing with our mouths when the reality and truth of our hearts were saying quite the opposite. Jesus picked up on this when he said, **Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."** (Mark 7:6)

If we are to truly worship God that means a much more honest response to what is happening in our lives, rather than a thin veneer of happiness and contentment.

Joel called for a much more honest response to this upcoming tragedy. He called for a return to God.

Anytime you move to a new place you learn you new phrases, new sayings. One of the things I have heard people saying here that I haven't heard people saying anywhere else is that something is only from the teeth out. I'm guessing what I am being told is there is no depth, no substance to what is being said or done. The phrase I would have used is much less polite, I

might have said all fur coat and nothing underneath (or something like that). Everything is for show, there is no substance.

Joel's call was for the people to acknowledge what was happening and not to simply say God will provide, or God will deliver, or God will sort it all out, but to come before him in an attitude of heartfelt self-examination, to confess this blind, teeth out faith that never acknowledged the reality of life and instead be honest with God. Lord, we have sinned, we have been superficial and this superficiality this has been our idolatry, this is what you have described as being unfaithful and we're both sorry and seeking more depth in our relationship with you.

Despite the image we are presenting here today with the decorations, the food, the songs and the meal we've had together – we are living through some of the most difficult times that the people in our country have faced in a long time. The cost-of-living crisis, the price of energy has quadrupled for some in the last few years, businesses are struggling.

People are more afraid now than anytime since the second world war – we have war in Europe, Putin talking about changing the rules which determine when nuclear weapons can be used. The war in the middle east is threatening to strip that whole region just as the locusts in Joel's prophecy once did. There is more political instability within the UK and US than I can remember at anytime in my life.

What is our response as a church and as a Christians to this. In the US the response seems to be to take sides, the church is splintering into factions that say you cannot possibly be a Christian and vote for Harris or the true Christian response is to vote for anyone other than trump.

In the UK, the response seems to be to be seen as doing good, to give to the foodbank, as we are doing today. While it is certainly good to alleviate the suffering, from what I can see neither in the US or the UK is the church and we as Christians are not responding with this honest self-examination that Joel is calling for. We are trying to overcome the hardships by doing things, but we are failing to address the root cause, we are refusing to be honest about our role and what it says about the God we believe in.

Throughout scripture difficult times are used as a way of calling not so much individuals, but nations, churches, and communities back to God. The New Testament letters of Peter, Hebrews and James to name a few are calling the church to remain faithful in the face of suffering, to persevere to not give up, to keep worshipping God.

Prophets such as Joel warn of hardships, but with those warnings comes the call to return to God. ***'Even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with all your fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.'*** (Joel 2: 12-13)

As we celebrate harvest today, certainly we acknowledge the goodness of God and the faithfulness of God because God is good and faithful. We also acknowledge the reality of the world in which we live. It is hard, it is painful, it is worrying. Part of what it is to celebrate the goodness of God is to throw ourselves on that goodness by confessing that all of this pain stems from the fact we are sinful. Whether it is our teeth out approach to life, or our blatant disobedience, all of us are sinful and all of us suffer the consequences and so life is hard.

Let's be honest with God about that. It's been a really poor summer and I'm guessing farmers are struggling, our climate is changing, and we are responsible for that – let's be honest before God and not just blindly say everything will be ok. This country is struggling because of the choices we've made be it things like BREXIT or the changes brought about by Liz Truss or going back further the mistakes of the Blair or Thatcher governments. We confess these to God instead of hiding from them. It's the same with personal issues in each of our lives. Confess them, own them instead of hiding from them.

This is the wonder of the gospel and the real celebration of harvest, we are promised that when we return to God all of the suffering, all the pain – none of it will be wasted or forgotten. ***I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten – the great locusts, the other locust and the locust swarm.*** (Joel 2:25)

There will be restoration, it won't be restoration like in some cartoon film where time suddenly goes backwards and so it is like the damage of the locusts never happened. This is a restoration that looks forward to a land without the scars of sin, a land where suffering is eliminated, and life is plentiful, but it begins with an honesty and integrity in our worship. A self-examination that says I know my part in all of this and because I know my part, that's why I throw myself on the goodness of God.