

Joel 2: 21-27

Psalm 126

I Timothy 2: 1-7

St. Matthew 6: 25-33

Harvest Thanksgiving 2024

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“Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things!”

Joel 2: 21

We live in a troubled time, don't we?... People openly use language – some of it on bumper stickers directed against a political party, or even against different brands of pickup trucks – which was never used in the small town where I grew up (and if a child or a teenager did use that language publicly, their mouth would likely be washed out with soap!)... Computer images are manipulated – called “deep fakes” – to make it appear that famous people are saying things they never said... There are dark concerns about environmental degradation... War in the Middle East appears to be accelerating and spreading... Closer to home, use of St. Brice's Food Bank about doubled in some recent weeks, compared to the same time last year... There are substantial challenges around adequate housing; increasingly poisonous illegal drugs; confusion about free speech in academic circles; and so forth...

All of us could add more items to this list, but we get the idea: We are currently living in a troubled season... In the background of all our lives, there can be low grade, constant anxiety, or annoyance, about the state of the world... It can also mislead us into thinking that the year we are in is a particularly bad time for the world, or to overlook the fact of God's substantial blessings...

This Sunday, during which we observe Harvest Thanksgiving, is the antidote to a grumpy world...

Today's first reading is from the prophet Joel. Joel is one of those short Old Testament books which is difficult to date exactly. Joel doesn't mention which king is in power when he is prophesying. The best guess is almost 400 years before the birth of Jesus...

But if we think *we* have it bad, believe me, God's people had it worse during the time of Joel!... Leading up to the time of Joel's prophecy, there has been a series of invasions by locusts – hoards of insects which have destroyed harvests in the land, year, after year, after year... Some people are on the brink of starvation (notably, Joel calls them “survivors”). Inter-tribal trade has been disrupted, and there is widespread violence...

But Joel doesn't dwell on the bad stuff!.. In fact, God reveals to Joel a vision of the coming days, when the Spirit of God begins something wonderful and new... The famine from the locusts will be only a distant memory. There will be a time of deep repentance, and then a coming time of restoration, of joy. The people will not have to depend on a class of professional prophets, because everyone, young and old, will be inspired to praise God!...

When Christians read Joel's prophecy about the coming work of the Spirit of the Lord being poured out on all people, we cannot but think about the gift of God the Holy Spirit at the Festival of Pentecost...

So, bad stuff going on in the world isn't a new phenomenon. Yet Joel recognizes God's goodness and mercy in the midst of it all. God has been at work in a wonderful way in our past. God is faithful, present, and at work today. And we can have a humble confidence in God's glorious work in the future!... Today's first reading begins this way, "Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things (2: 21)..."

So, rather than being gloomy, the scriptures show that our orientation ought to be toward gladness, and gratitude... Groceries can be expensive, but we face nothing like the famine which choked the land in Joel's day! As Canadians, we are in fact in a time and place of enormous privilege...

Even beyond the blessings of harvest, above all, we have the gift of Jesus Christ – and all that comes with responding to him. Today's second reading is from First Timothy 2: We read about the importance of prayer, and prayers of thanksgiving. Then, right away, the readers are invited to appreciate the gift of Jesus Christ:

This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For  
there is one God;  
there is also one mediator between God and humankind,  
Christ Jesus, himself human,  
who gave himself a ransom for all  
—this was attested at the right time. (vv. 3-6)

Jesus Christ paid the price – he paid the ransom for us all – so that we are set free from sin, to freedom; from death, to unending life... He died, so that you and I can be free...

I am sure it is no accident that right after reading about prayers of thanksgiving, we read about the gift of God himself, through Jesus Christ. It is appropriate that we too give thanks and praise, not only for food and blessings in the natural world (important as that is), but for the gift of God in Christ Jesus... We are redeemed. We are set free by faith. We respond with an attitude of great gratitude, dedicating our lives to respond to God's glorious gift through his Son Jesus...

There's an old evangelical hymn, which I think captures the kind of gratitude we are supposed to carry as Christians:

Count your blessings, count them one by one.  
Count your blessings see what God has done.

Yes, this world has its troubles today. It always has... We need to address them, with prayer, wisdom, and determination... But let's not allow the troubles of the moment to overwhelm the fact of the gospel: We have received many blessings, and it's appropriate to respond with gratitude and thanksgiving... Above all, we give thanks to God for his Son Jesus Christ, a free gift which we didn't deserve, and which we can never measure...

Will you stand and join with me in singing this old verse of praise?

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise him all creatures here below.  
Praise him above, ye heavenly host.  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Amen.