**Church Sermon – 27th October-19**

**May the words of my mouth and the dedication of my heart be acceptable in thy sight O Lord, Amen.**

The word “loss” and “lost” can be treated as positive words when tagged to, say, weight loss, lost cash recovered and lost and found. So, I lost 15 pounds in a new fitness regime, I recovered £5,000 loss from a banking error and, finally, my pet cat was lost but now found. All good news!

Then we have the flip side of “loss”. I lost my parents at a young age. I lost everything due to unforgiveness and mistake. And I nearly ended it all because I lost the will to live.

We all know loss or lost mostly from negative experiences of losing something or someone, money, grief or someone badly missed. And, yet, we struggle to draw lessons from difficult experiences because there was no way out. We tried but failed…

For others, a way out of their loss or grief is offered but they struggle with an alternative way out of the problems or heed the advice given, which stands in the way of recovery or progress.

**Prophet Joel**

Today’s Old Testament reading from the Prophet Joel opens with a judgement on Judah of the Southern Kingdom of Israel. This related to the impending judgement of God and the nation’s corporate loss of privileges. Why? The people of Judah had become prosperous and complacent. Taking God for granted, they turned to self-centredness, idolatry and sin. Joel warned that this kind of lifestyle would inevitably bring God’s judgement and personal loss.

This judgement centred on the use of locusts at that time as instruments of God’s punishment for sin. Such locusts were devastating as an invading army. Locusts gathered in swarms too numerous to count and flew several feet above ground with the effect of darkening the sun. And, when they land on vegetation, everything in their path is devoured. For any farmer experiencing this plague, the loss is devastating and horrendous, particularly, if it happened around here.

And, while the historical impact of Joel’s prophecy was true, with the subsequent invading armies of the Assyrians and Babylonians, he spoke of a future point in time when all face the judgement of the Lord, described as the Day of Repentance. A time of relevance for us believers today.

I quote the words of Joel:

That’s why the Lord says, Turn to me now while there’s time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping and mourning. Don’t tear your clothing in grief, but tear your hearts instead. Return to the Lord your God for He is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

You see, the people were told to turn to God while there was still time. Destruction (or loss) would soon be upon the Hebrews community, after which their villages were plundered and they were taken captive by the Assyrians. This message has relevance for us too. Time is running out for us. Because we don’t know what lies before us, we should trust and obey God now while we can. Don’t let anything hinder us from turning to him in repentance.

In those days, repentance or deep remorse was often by tearing one’s clothes. But God didn’t want an outward display of repentance without repentance on the inside. In other words, inward transformation of our hearts.

So that takes us to today’s reading later in the second chapter. That despite the Lord’s pronounced judgement upon the Hebrews for their complacency, they were promised restoration, mercy and compassion. This was a turning point in Joel’s message – that there was still hope. The future was promising, not negative.

Joel said in words relevant for that time: “Look I am sending you provisions, grain and olive oil, enough to satisfy their needs. The Hebrews will no longer be an object of mockery among their neighbours, enemies will be driven away”.

And I believe these same words have relevance to us.

“Be glad now and rejoice, Joel writes, for the Lord has done great things to bring restoration”. The 25th verse takes me back to my opening comment:

“The Lord says, I will give you back what you lost to the swarming locusts , the hopping locusts, the stripping locusts and the cutting locusts.”

In the Jewish Bible, this reads: “I will restore to you the ***years*** that the locust ate, the grasshoppers, shearer worms and cutter worms , my great army that I sent you”.

The swarming locusts, the hopping locust, the stripping locusts and the cutting locusts were relevant for that time and culture.

The years the locusts ate, the grasshoppers, shearer worms and cutter worms had relevance to that culture but are metaphors for these contemporary times.

I wonder what we would name these insect metaphors today: relationships, money, family, hurt, illnesses, regrets, doubts, anger and loss!

If these words ring inside you, then I believe it is time to heed the relevance of God’s word via Prophet Joel for today:

* I will give back what you lost (Whatever these may be, I will give back what you lost!)
* I will restore to you the years lost (Whatever these may be, this is your time for restoration!)

But, am I standing in my way?

Someone once said that a neurotic is a person who focuses more on what he lacks than what he possesses. Many of us live on the borders of neurosis because we fail to recognise the blessings of God in our lives, and the way in which He is working all things out for good.

A great thinker once said: “Man is not made happy by what he has but what he is thankful for. Whether it be material possessions, success, friendship, love; every factor which might bring us greater happiness only make us actually happier as we appreciate it.

I wonder therefore if recognising blessings and being thankful are the answers behind the words of the Prophet Joel:

* I will give back what you lost
* I will restore to you the years lost

Recovering our loss or restoration of those years lost are in fact all about viewing God’s provision and hope through our relationships, our money, our family, our hurt, our illnesses, our regrets, our doubts, our anger and loss! To face life through the spectacles of His blessings and thankfulness, and saying sorry for our sins.

I give myself permission to be Happy!

A doctor quoted that the happiest and healthiest people are those who are quick to praise – not flatterers or the insincere, but those who look for and are quick to recognise the praiseworthy aspects of every situation. Dyspeptics are notorious grumblers, according to the medical profession. However, could this be caused by burning or pain in their digestive system, bloating or feeling full after eating just a small amount of food? I don’t know but when we fail to praise that which is good and worthy recognition, we are depleted, starved, poisoned and lose our sense of well-being.

This is why I believe the word of God, according to the Prophet Joel’s narrative, carries a deep meaning:

* I will give back what you lost
* I will restore to you the years lost

Private loss and disappointment

Another aspect of loss is when we struggle in our search for personal answers. The loss remains unhealed, inconclusive, uncertain, hurtful. Restoration remains such a distance away!

For many who struggled with life in their childhood and teenager years, we still need to know what we never heard, or heard so badly, from our parents, in particular, our dads. We need to know who we are and if we have - what it takes.

What do we do with that ultimate question?

TELL ME, where do we go to find an answer?

My question is what have we done with our unanswered question?

TELL ME, where have we taken it?

You see our core question will not go away. We may try for years to bury it out of awareness and just get on with life but that “loss” will never be filled or restored!

This is a hunger so essential to our souls that it will compel us to find a solution!

Could this be a time for healing?

Peter was a successful businessman. He drove an expensive Land Rover with all the bells and whistles. The next day he drove in another expensive car, a BMW. He lived in the largest house in the town and had a vacation home in Portugal. None of his wealth was inherited, he worked for every pound his business generated. He loved Formula 1 racing and fly fishing and so I could go on. We’d think that Peter would be all so confident, self-aware, self-assured and grounded. He had all the appearances of a great man. After several hours of conversation, he admitted that he is coming to a revelation. Peter lost his dad to cancer earlier that year but he didn’t cry as he was never close. He said, all these years, he knocked himself to get ahead but he wasn’t enjoying himself. What was it for? He now confesses that he was trying to win his dad’s approval. There was a long, sad silence. Then Peter said quietly, through tears, “It never worked”.

Of course, no matter how hard we try, we cannot engineer our solution to loss until we come to terms that it is only through God, restoration can come. Our wounds (or loss) can never be healed or tell us who we are. But Oh, so many of us still buy into this means of self-healing and validation, particularly, us men! And it never works!

Today’s Gospel reading from the 18th chapter of Luke contrasts the response of the self-righteous Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The first prayed aloud for others to hear his self-righteous prayer, the Tax Collector prayed recognising his sin and begged for mercy. Sin gets in the way of us and God. It creates pride, it blinds us to our behaviour and prevents us from learning from our mistakes and making sense of our loss.

Making sense of our loss becomes easier with daily prayers of thankfulness, recognising our blessings and asking for forgiveness because we need God’s mercy every day. We benefit from a second chance. It was never in our strength or any great thing we did to deserve what we have; it was God’s mercies.

We find healing in the one who gave His life as a sacrifice, Jesus Christ. Healing leads to transformation on the inside moving towards the outside. Forgiveness over that loss becomes the opening door for restoration. Forgiveness is a decision, not a feeling. We decide to forgive; God changes the heart. Forgiveness means giving up your right to hold on to an offence or loss. Forgiveness changes our hearts, even if it does not change the person who hurt us. Forgiveness turns injury into compassion.

To forgive is to set the prisoner free and discover the prisoner was us.

So, we return to the words of the Prophet Joel:

* I will give back what you lost. YES, THE LORD IS READY TO BRING RESTORATION TO YOUR LOSS
* I will restore to you the years lost. YES, THE LORD IS READY TO RESTORE THOSE LOST YEARS IN YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES

Can I now accept myself? YES, YOU CAN!

Can I now forgive myself and turn a new leaf? YES YOU CAN!

The sixth chapter of Luke’s Gospel:

* Forgive others and you will be forgiven

George Macdonald said that afflictions are but the shadow of God’s wings. And, yes, it is true once we see them through God’s perspectives.

Is there a need for prayer? Healing, Forgiveness?

There’s time now or we could pray with you after church

Amen