

Joel (3): Has anything like this ever happened?

Please read Joel 1 v 1-15 and then pray: *God of majesty and splendour, may your holy Word strengthen my faith and witness, and my determination to love You above all, and to love my neighbour as myself, for Your Name's sake. Amen.*

As I share with you this third sermon on the prophecy of Joel, we at last come to a consideration of that very important question which the prophet addressed to **the elders** of his community, and to *all who lived in the land.* (v2)

Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers?

It soon becomes clear what the **this** is in Joel's question. The "this" refers to the locust plague itself, and then secondly to the wider damage caused by the plague. Joel is urging the people to **reflect upon** two things; the severity and gravity of the plague, and the serious economic and social damage it has caused.

Joel's question infers that *this particular* locust plague was **historically unprecedented**. Can the oldest members of the community recall any other locust plague that compares to the severity of this one? As the elders discussed this question amongst themselves, it seems very likely that the conclusion they would come to, would be that this recent devastating locust plague was by far the worst in living memory, and that the damage it had caused was absolutely unprecedented. It would be hard for the elders to claim that there had been a worst situation than the present one they all now faced. This present crisis was unrivalled. It was severe and *everyone* was affected by it. Nothing and no-one had remained unscathed.

Chapter 1 of Joel reflects on the **huge losses** to the nation— and they are huge! The economic losses were catastrophic because the whole land had been laid to waste. Hardly a fruit tree remained. The crops had been decimated. Joel reveals that everything had completely "dried up". He uses that expression **dried up** 4 times within 3 verses. (**read 10-12**) There was bad news spiritually as well. Offerings at the Temple had stopped through lack of wine, oil and grain. The people have no tithes to give, so offerings had ended. The priests were in mourning. Joy has evaporated from the entire nation. (**v12b**) Psychologically and emotionally this has been the bitterest of blows. Everything the population enjoyed and found pleasurable had been adversely affected. It would be out of the question to hold a wedding. Banquets were a non-starter. And if you were addicted to drink (**v5**), you were facing agonising disappointment and distress because the new wine had completely failed.

The conclusion we come to as we study Joel is that both *the plague of locusts* and *the results of the plague* were **historically unprecedented**. The elders of the land would all be in agreement about this. In the ensuing years they would tell the generations to come just how dreadful things had been because of this particular devastating plague *and its aftermath*. No-one would be in disagreement.

Now we must consider our own present crisis with Covid-19. In what way is what we have experienced over the last 15 months been *historically unprecedented*? Undeniably, in terms of its general impact on the entire world and in terms of news media coverage, Covid-19 is without doubt unprecedented. For the last 15+ months Covid-19 has dominated our world. What about the virus' serious threat to life? In terms of mortality, and the number of deaths, is it unprecedented? This is something that will be analysed for some time to come – but it appears that Covid-19 is not as deadly as was first feared, and there is no way it can be compared to the Spanish flu (1918) which is estimated to have killed 50,000,000 people, and in which people *of all ages* were affected.

As things stand now (May 12, 2021) according to **Worldometer**, there have been;
160,409,776 **cases** of Covid-19.
138,201,737 **recoveries** from Covid-19
3,333,728 actual deaths relating to Covid in some way.

Covid 19 is therefore more comparable to the major Influenza pandemics of 1957 and 1968 – the Asian and the Hong Kong influenzas (1-4 million deaths). What is important to note is that what is known as the IFR (Infection Fatality Rate) for Covid-19 is pretty low. Outstanding work, officially accepted by WHO (World Health Organisation) and now on their website has been done by the very eminent Stanford Professor of Medicine and Epidemiology John. P. A. Ioannidis, who has calculated that *globally* the IFR rate is 0.23%, more recently revised to **0.15%**. This is good news. Originally many feared that the IFR may be as high as 3-4%. This means that **for every million** infections – there are **1500 deaths**.

We also know that the average age of death from Covid-19 is **82.4 years**. This is the figure that is most often quoted. I have checked that figure with regards to the UK – and it is slightly lower here. In the spring of 2020 and during the first wave, according to the ONS (Office of National Statistics) the average age of death in England and Wales was 80.4 years, 78.7 for men and 82.4 for women. Virtually all who have died from Covid also had at least 1, but often 2 or 3 other significant underlying conditions.

It is worth remembering what Chris Whitty and others emphasised several times at the outset of the crisis. A large number of those who contract Covid would have *no or very mild symptoms*. Some would have to struggle with flu like symptoms for a few days or a week or so. A small number who contracted Covid would have to be hospitalised – most would recover and return home fairly quickly; some would require longer care. A smaller number would sadly pass away in hospital. Every passing is sad.

The virus does not threaten children at all. About 40% of those who have died were very weak, frail and aged people in nursing homes, people whose deaths were brought forward by a few weeks or months. Such frail elderly people are always the most susceptible to the latest virus. Every passing is sad. In terms of its lethality then, Covid is not unprecedented, but it is serious for the very elderly (as are lots of other things) and certain vulnerable groups in society.

What is without doubt unprecedented is the **reaction** and **response** to this virus. This is the first time in history that national **lockdowns** have been used by many (but not all) countries to help combat the spread of a virus. This is **unprecedented** because the healthy members of society have been asked to *stay at home*, not just the sick and the most vulnerable. Never before have the healthy been quarantined. The UK Government had a “Pandemic Preparedness Strategy” drafted in 2011 in line with international ethical norms and 100 years of scientific evidence. The WHO had similar pandemic strategy recommendations (2019). Lockdowns were actively discouraged. It was prepared primarily for an Influenza pandemic, but also envisaged a SARS-like pandemic which anticipated several hundred thousand deaths. This strategy was abandoned in mid-March 2021 in favour of full national lockdown. Many countries have followed a similar policy, but some have not. Sweden is a noteworthy exception in Europe, and different States in the USA have pursued different policies.

What is fascinating in the USA is that those States like S Dakota and Florida where lockdowns have not been imposed or where they have been lifted long ago appear to have fared no worse than those with strict lockdown policies. Mortality rates in N Dakota with strict lockdowns are no better than neighbouring S Dakota with no lockdowns. Likewise, Florida with lockdowns lifted since September 2020 has fared no worse than California who have gone for the very strictest of lockdowns. Florida also has a much more elderly population, because it is a popular place to retire, but still it has done at

least as well if not better than California in terms of mortality. The debate about the effectiveness of lockdowns in cutting the number of deaths will rage on for years to come – and in the USA – it will get very litigious. The reason for this heated debate is that lockdowns themselves have caused calamitous collateral economic and social damage and death. People may legitimately ask, *was it really necessary for my business to be destroyed, or for my mental health to be crushed, or for my children to miss months of schooling?* The multiple challenges that lie ahead for affected nations are complex and deeply concerning.

In Joel's day, the elders and the rest of the population were asked by the prophet to reflect long and hard upon the very serious economic, social and spiritual consequences of the unprecedented locust plague. Both were unprecedented – the plague and its ruinous consequences – and so, much prayer and repentance would be needed according to the prophet. Joel chapter 1 is really a story about **significant loss** hence the prophet's use of such verbs as **mourn** (v 8,9,13), **grieve** (v 8,11) **wail** (v 5,11,13) and **despair** (v11). Joel's nation was having to deal with bereavement/loss on a massive scale, not merely loss of life, but loss on a much wider social and economic scale.

This is what we face now in the UK and we must all (especially the Church) **be awake** (v5) to respond with prayer and loving compassionate action. I cannot possibly go through the full range of the damage done due to lockdowns, but I will present you now with some key points, and I want to come back to the damage *done to the Church* and the Church's future challenges and opportunities in my final sermon on chapter one which I will share with you in June. Before I share with you my concerns for our nation under lockdown, let me share with you a picture I received whilst praying in the middle of 2020. In a dream/vision the Lord gave me;

I was stood on a beach some way from the sea. It was a nice day, but the clouds were gathering and the wind was picking up. As I looked out to sea, I could see what appeared to be an unusually large wave coming toward the shore. I thought to myself that when this wave breaks it is likely to knock over any people who are in its pathway. Then I suddenly noticed an even bigger wave in the distance, much bigger than the first wave, and this wave alarmed me even more. As I have continued to pray and think about this vision the Lord gave me, I sensed that the first wave represented the virus and the wave that followed, the bigger one, represented the still greater damaging effects of lockdowns.

I am concerned about the future of the NHS which we have sought to protect through lockdowns. The NHS waiting lists are *now* at a record high (unprecedented) of nearly 4.9 million. The number of people waiting more than a year for an operation has risen from 1600 before the crisis to 388,000 now. This continues to rise. According the Evening Standard between March-September 2020, 3 million people missed out on important screenings. Hundreds of thousands have missed out on being assessed for various conditions. Professor Karl Sikora who has worked in oncology for 50 years has written about the fact that approximately 40,000 fewer people started cancer treatment in 2020.

Before Covid-19 arrived, we already had what can only be described as a mental health crisis in our nation. This has now got significantly worse because of lockdowns. Half of young people aged 16-25 have reported deteriorating mental health with 1 in 4 speaking about their struggles to cope. Loneliness and separation have caused untold damage to the mental health of the elderly, students, teenagers and children. Social interaction for such groups is not optional but absolutely vital. Many elderly people have succumbed to "mental defeat" and given up and lost the will to fight and carry on. 1.5 million children under 18 will either need new or additional mental health support as a result of covid restrictions and the frightening media coverage. 500,000 of these are completely new cases. Self-harming, eating disorders, suicidal ideation has increased significantly. Suicides have increased. Just a few weeks ago a decision was taken to close the footpaths on to the Humber Bridge because there had been *an unprecedented* 6 suicides within the space of 4 weeks. Will our already stretched

mental health services be able to cope with all that lies ahead? There are massive challenges around the corner as we reach record levels of depression and anxiety disorders. Levels of alcohol abuse (and other substance abuse) have risen as people are locked into homes with lots of time on their hands. Along with the rise of alcohol abuse, domestic abuse and violence in homes has sky-rocked. Children have not even been able to go to school to get away from the abuse. So many families have been stuck in smaller dwellings or high-rise flats, cramped in together, often attempting to work from home and home school their frantic children. It's been a recipe for disaster.

Then there is the economic damage. Lord, have mercy. Let us never forget that increased poverty in any part of the world leads to deaths and much shorter life expectancy. The U.N. reports that millions of the poorest people in the world will suffer greatly as they have been pushed into deeper levels of poverty and hunger by lockdowns (either their own or lockdowns in the West). Like in the days of Joel, so many areas of our economic life have suffered catastrophically. This includes the following sectors; retail (we are a nation of shopkeepers and small businesses); tourism; hospitality (3 million jobs depend on this sector); arts and culture sectors; sports, events and entertainment industry and our large service sector. About 250,000 small – medium sized businesses have already ceased to exist. The UK economy shrank by 9.9% in 2020 – this is the biggest drop in recorded history (unprecedented). If you compare this to 2008, the year of the devastating financial crash which was followed by years of painful austerity, the economy shrank then by about 4%. Unemployment has risen to 5% thus far, and the worst hit in terms of jobs and job prospects are the under 25's. We must bear this in mind in our prayers. As the furlough scheme comes to an end, our nation is now faced with more than a 2 trillion £ debt (and growing) burden. Have we woken up to the serious reality of the situation? What I have shared is merely the ***tip of the iceberg.***

What is also deeply concerning is the now *unprecedented* levels of **fear and anxiety** in our society. There is no doubt that the Government and the media have used scare tactics and messaging to achieve greater compliance to lockdown rules. Mask mandates have contributed to fear levels. The release of the minutes of a meeting of SAGE which took place on the 22nd March 2020 are revealing. *"The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased using hard hitting messaging"*. Children have been terrified by what they have witnessed. This could all horribly backfire because fear paralyzes people. Fear leads to anxiety, panic, irrational behaviour, uncritical thinking and unhealthy levels of stress. We saw early on in the crisis the irrational selfish and stupid panic buying. Many people will struggle to recover – such are the deep-seated psychological fears and phobias they now possess and are possessed by. People are literally traumatised and many are now displaying symptoms of bereavement and loss. The loss in self-confidence and trust among all age groups is very noticeable.

To use the word "unprecedented" once more, this time in a positive way; shouldn't we be exceptionally grateful that highly effective vaccines have been developed and rolled out so very quickly and efficiently. This is ***the major plus story*** of the past year, and one we should be very grateful to God for. We give thanks for those who tirelessly worked to discover and produce a number of effective vaccines. Thanks be to God. The speed of this excellent work has been truly *unprecedented*.

So how will people tell the generations to come about their experiences of these unprecedented times? How will **you** speak about this period of your life? What stories will **you** share with those not yet born? Joel's prophecy focuses on the need to be honest with the generations to come. What will we tell them about our pandemic crisis and lockdowns? We may well have to reflect on our experiences for some time to come before we can accurately share them with the next generation.

Each person will have a different story to tell. What will the person who worked for months in ICU dressed in PPE every day in one of our busy hospitals tell others? What will the person who was an essential worker tell others? What will an isolated and lonely student tell others? What will children

and teenagers have to say about their experiences and losses? What will those who lost a loved one have to say – a loved one to Covid or a loved one who simply could not access vital hospital treatment when they needed it? What will a police officer have to tell others? What will a member of Government tell others or write about in their best-selling diaries? What will those deprived of attending the funeral of a loved one tell others? What will those who lost their businesses and their homes speak about? Many stories will be stories about personal and communal **loss**. The story of *the unprecedented loss of personal precious liberties and freedoms will be a story told time and time again. Even in the worst days of the 2nd world war – the loss of personal freedom was nowhere near the scale we have experienced during the lockdowns. Reflect on that!*

In closing, the prophet Joel saw the crisis he and his nation faced as a massive **wake up call**. (v5) It wasn't just the drunkards who needed to wake up – it was *everyone*. Everyone needed to be shaken out of the deadly complacency and sin they had fallen into; complacency about the way they faced life, morals, ethics, faith, community life and death itself. We all need to wake up and get to grips with what is important in God's eyes and what our priorities in life should actually be. For the Christian this is obvious: Jesus said that the *greatest and most important* commandment was that we love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and that we love our neighbours as ourselves. Do we not need to *wake up* again to this reality before God, to whom one day we will have to give an account of our life, our words and our actions? A crisis like a serious pandemic should and must alert us and awaken us! As the apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Rome;

And do this (fulfil God's commands), UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT TIME. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. (Romans 13: 11-12) We have to use the time we have left to get things right with God – because our time is running out – perhaps quicker than we realise or appreciate!

The Psalmist reminds us of the certainty of our death. We only have about three score and ten years, or 80 years or so, if we have the physical strength to live that long. Remember 80 years is the average age of death from Covid. So, keep a balanced perspective. We are here today and gone tomorrow like the grass of the field. Understand, says the Psalmist (**Psalm 90**) that life is short, fragile, unpredictable and troublesome. Ask God to teach you "to number your days properly, so that you can live with a wise eternal perspective." (Psalm 90: 12) Be ready for what comes next after death. Ensure above all things, that you make the everlasting God **your dwelling place** (Psalm 90: 1-2), then you will possess everlasting life and hope.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson who was treated for Covid in St Thomas' hospital said that the experience of being so seriously ill had *humbled him* and *changed him* and made him think about what was really important. We all need to be humbled, and we are being humbled at the present time, and we are being reminded that that this world which is *passing away* (1 Corinthians 7:31, 1 John 2:17, Matthew 24:35) is not the safe and predictable place we may have assumed it was. It is being subject to a process of shaking – but there is thank God, **an unshakeable kingdom in Jesus Christ**. (Hebrews 12: 25-29)

May the Lord who reigns over all *awaken* and *change us* according to his will – and *be with us* according to his grace and mercy. Amen!

Revd Peter J Clarkson (16.5.21)