

St John & St Stephen's Church, Orts Road, Reading, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2023, 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Joel 1:10-12, 2:21-24

### Seeds of Hope

*"The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails. Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vine-dressers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined. The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm, and apple—all the trees of the field are dried up; surely, joy withers away among the people."* Joel 1:10-12

Well, it's not often at St John's that we get to read such doom-laden words as that, but here they are. They are Holy Scripture, specifically the small OT book of Joel, probably written around 3000 years ago. A plague of locusts had ruined the land of Israel. The prophet Joel saw this as God's judgement on the nation and was calling the people to repentance. It is a lament, an outpouring of sorrow and grief at the state of the land, which was ruined. The thing is, these words I read could have been written today. This is the bleak reality of increasing numbers of people in the world as the climate warms and brings unpredictability to farming, and drought, and paradoxically also flooding, are replacing the steady and reliable sequence of the seasons which generations of farmers have relied on. What is happening in large parts of Africa is affecting us too: many of the migrants who make their perilous way across the Mediterranean Sea, Europe and finally the English Channel – if they are lucky - to this country are doing so because they are unable to make a living any more from the land. The irony is that they have done nothing to cause the devastation with which they are burdened. It is the rich industrial countries of the West – of which this country was the first out of the stable – who have largely caused this tragedy by burning colossal amounts of fossil fuel – coal, oil and gas and thus releasing carbon dioxide into the air, the major cause of global heating. Many of us will have seen empty shelves at the supermarket recently: some of this is a result of drought in Spain, not far from Africa, from which much of our fresh produce comes. For most of us it's simply an inconvenience; for many, it's a disaster.

In this somewhat grim context, I'd like to introduce you to Malawi, a small country in SE Africa. The carbon footprint of someone from the UK – that's you and me - is 64 times bigger than that of a Malawian. It is reeling from the effects of climate change – bad enough – but then cyclone Freddy devastated the country for 5 solid weeks in February and March this year. How do we even begin to know what that is like?

With that lament from Joel ringing in our ears, and a sense of the hardship that the people of Malawi face, let's hear some more verses from Holy Scripture, from the next chapter of Joel:

*"Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain<sup>[a]</sup> for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing-floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil."* (Joel 2:21-24)

This passage, full of hope, is just a chapter away from the lament of chapter 1. Despair to hope, darkness to light, death to resurrection. Could this be an alternative future for countries like Malawi? It begins with the words, *'Do not fear'*. And we might well feel fear in the face of climate crisis, and hopelessness as we hear about the hardships endured by people in countries like Malawi. *'Do not fear'* is one of the commonest commands in the bible – amazingly, it is said, 365 times – once for every day of the year! It does not belittle the fear we may feel but calls us to not let fear win. *Do not be afraid!* The status quo depends on our fear-induced apathy. I notice that in this passage, it is the

*soil* and the *animals of the field* that are commanded not to fear! I wonder whether the soul of the earth, Mother Earth, and the animals of the field, do indeed feel fear at what is unfolding?

Let's find some hope. Seeds of hope! I would like to introduce you to a remarkable plant – the Pigeon Pea which most of us have probably never heard of. It's drought-resistant, flood resistant, nutritious and you can even make bread with it...let's watch a short video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JS5CZUSB94I>

Isn't that lovely? The joy of Esther and her friends literally brought tears to my eyes, the way that in the face of loss, change and hardship, she and her friends have created something tasty and even joyful from the humble Pigeon Pea, a plant that has almost been created for times such as these. In fact, perhaps it was created exactly for times such as these, who knows? It's a reminder of the abundance and diversity of the earth and the goodness of the Creator. However, let's not forget that on the very practical level, it was the Nandolo Farmers' Association, supported by Christian Aid involvement which brought about the transformation in Esther's circumstances, teaching her to improve their harvest of Pigeon Peas, make some profit rather than sell to unscrupulous vendors, and get an oven so she and her friends could run a bakery. In addition, the increased income enabled Esther to buy tools for her daughter Ziwone's carpentry business, pay for her other daughter Rashida's school costs, the lodgings near her school, a part-time tutor, acquire a herd of 13 goats who provide manure for her crops, saving on expensive fertiliser, be able to store her pigeon peas in a warehouse, safe from floods and storms, and buy a sewing machine. Wow!

The video picked up themes of prayer, friendship, neighbourliness, practical help, and joy that witnessed to the transformation: despair to hope, poverty to plenty, death to resurrection as Esther said herself. None of this happened without practical, real-world help given by human beings. I'm reminded of the prayer of St Teresa of Avila:

*Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours.  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassionately on this world.  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.*

Well, there it is. Do not fear. Sow seeds of hope. Practical help can change things. Give generously to Christian Aid so that more people like Esther can experience resurrection hope in their lives. So that Joel chapter 1 can lead on to Joel chapter 2.

*Richard Croft*