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A Reflection

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RESTORATION

Joel 2:23–32; 2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18; Luke 18:9–14

‘Restoration’ is a popular theme today, in many of our TV shows , from The Repair Shop to Château DIY to Animal Rescue. They are all programmes about restoring things to their former glory.

There’s something wholesome about an old family heirloom being repaired, an old château being given new life, or a pet restored to good health.

Our three readings for today focus on the themes of restoration, divine justice, humble prayer and the promise of renewal—both personal and communal.

Our first reading from Joel 2 is often connected to the first Christian Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on a large gathering of the first generation of Christians as described in (Acts 2). The Spirit was poured out, like refreshing rain, on the Early church.

The event is often taken to be the ‘birthday’ of the Christian Church. We celebrate Pentecost every year as the day when the church ‘came alive’, when the church was equipped with the missionary tools of the Holy Spirit.

We also celebrate Pentecost as the day when the gospel was ‘universalized’ as, for the first time, people from every nation and race heard the message of the gospel in their own tongue.

A Jewish scholar reading the Joel passage might see another interpretation.

A Jewish scholar might say that Joel was describing an actual situation where the people of Israel were recovering from devastating locust plagues and drought.

In the Joel reading, God promises to restore the lost years that the swarming locusts have eaten. God promises to send abundant rain and pour out his spirit on all flesh.

The effect will be, that young and old will again, begin to see visions and dream dreams of a brighter future beyond the drought and locust plagues.

God will send refreshing rain! There will be a time of restoration, both physical and spiritual.

That sense of restoration and hope in the future is part of the DNA of the Judaeo Christian faith. We are a people of hope who believe in a God who creates Hope even in the worst situations.

God creates hope even in a crucified Christ and an empty tomb.

2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18

Again, in our second reading from St Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, we see the similar theme of Faithful Endurance and the hope of Divine restoration.

Paul reflects on his life as a 'libation' or a "poured out offering,". From his prison cell, he has weighed up the chances of his release, together with his natural aging.

He has concluded that he is probably coming to the end of his earthly life and he affirms that in this life, 'the Lord stood by me and gave me strength and that he will do it again.'

He then speaks of being rescued and preserved for the heavenly kingdom.

Being eternally with God will be his restoration and his vindication. His hope is in the God revealed to Him in Jesus who is Emanuel 'God with us'.

'the time of my departure has come. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.'

Luke 18:9–14

The gospel reading offers another fascinating insight into our human nature. It is a cautionary word to the religious and a word to those who feel entitled.

It is also a word of restoration and healing to people who feel broken.

When I was a young person looking around at various churches, I realized that there were some churches where I could never feel comfortable as a member.

Churches where I would probably never feel 'good enough' to be accepted as a member. Churches where I would suffer from what Psychologists call, 'impostor syndrome'.

The churches I'm talking about were usually huge churches that were obsessed with religious purity and obsessed with sexual sin, as if that was the only sin in the world.

I was not committing sexual sins at the time, you may be pleased to hear. But these churches failed to address some of the issues that I was facing at the time – like racial prejudice, social injustice, and my (then) youthful search for identity and belonging.

Unfortunately, a minority of the pastors of those churches (in NZ and overseas) fell on their own swords. Despite their preaching about purity they succumbed to the very sins they decried.

Churches were divided and people left the churches because of the moral downfall of the pastors. Fortunately, others joined other churches where they felt at home. A few of them even joined the Presbyterian churches, even though we were not as exciting as some of the new mega churches.

The problem with churches that were obsessed with purity, is there is often no concern for social justice or the salvation of the people whom Jesus focused on – the poor and the marginalized.

In such churches, the focus was very narcissistic - a focus on 'my personal salvation'. 'I'm okay with Jesus – even if others are not'.

One of the things which stands out in Jesus' parables is the number of times 'gentiles' or non-Jewish believers are the heroes of the parable and the number of times where the believers are the antiheroes.

There are about seven parables in the gospels where the hero is a gentile, a sinner, or an outsider.

I won't go through them all but two of the best examples are The Good Samaritan and today's parable in Luke.

In the parable, the Pharisee believed that he was entitled to God's favour. That he had earned God's favour.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.

The Pharisee was not an evil man, but his focus was on his own salvation. A salvation based on purity and his own good works. His relationship with sinners was one where he felt a spiritual and moral superiority over them and an entitlement to God's favour.

In contrast was the attitude of the tax collector.

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

The tax collector recognized his own brokenness and his own need for God's mercy. He prayed from a place of humility and openness.

'I tell you', said Jesus, 'this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Restoration in this parable is not only moral, but it is also relational.

Our attitude towards God, towards others and towards self, is the litmus test of genuine faith.

It is not enough just to love God and ourselves – not enough to be concerned about our own salvation. The most challenging part is to also love our neighbour.

The good news is that God sees us in our brokenness and in our isolation and invites us to be restored, not by our own good works but by God's grace and kindness.

We are restored to a right relationship with God by becoming the tax collector in the parable - coming to God from a place of humility. Coming to God from a place where we are not judging our neighbour. Coming to God from the place where we recognize our own brokenness.

Coming to God, through Christ, who restores our relationship with God.

A God who is like the father in another of Jesus' Parables. A God who is keen to restore his relationship with the prodigal son/daughter who recognizes his/her own need and the father's generosity.

Prayer

God of abundance and mercy,
You send the rain to renew the earth,
and pour out Your Spirit to restore Your people.
Refresh our hearts where they have grown weary,
restore our vision where it has dimmed,
and awaken us to Your presence in every season.
May we walk humbly, live generously,
and bear witness to Your restoring love,
through Jesus Christ,
who redeems all things and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Amen.