

October 19, 2003
The Prophet Joel

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Arguably the greatest merit of the Book of Joel is that it provided the text for the Church's very first sermon at nine o'clock on the morning of Pentecost (Acts 2: 14-21).

Otherwise, we know rather little about the man himself. Except for the opening verse of his book, the prophet is never otherwise mentioned in the rest of the Old Testament, even though twelve other biblical characters bear the same name. Unlike almost all of the other biblical prophets, no editorial care was taken to give an appropriate context and set of dates to his prophetic words. Thus, the proper placing of Joel in his own historical setting is unusually difficult. His words tend, therefore, to take on a certain "indefinite" and even timeless character uncommon in biblical literature.

That said, Joel's reference to the international slave trade (3:4-8), a preoccupation also of Amos (1:6-9), may suggest that he prophesied in the eighth century. Such a dating would also explain why this book traditionally appears in the Bible between Hosea and Amos, two other prophets preoccupied with the social evils of that century. A dating in the eighth century would likewise make Joel a contemporary of Hesiod, the notable social critic of the Greeks. Curiously, it is in respect to the slave trade that Joel does, in fact, refer to the Greeks, or more properly "the Ionians" (*haiyowanim* -Joel 3:6).

The context of Joel's prophecy was some extraordinary visitation of locusts, in which the harvest of an entire season was destroyed, endangering the people's survival during the following winter. (This agrarian concern also puts us in mind of Hesiod.) The whole population was facing famine. Joel's response to the situation may be summarized like this: "You think you are having a rough time now? Just wait. The present disaster is only a warm-up exercise for the Lord's Day, the time of His visitation in judgment. For those who refuse to repent, far worse things lie in store."

Joel's prophecies present the reader, therefore, with a

sustained call to repentance, fasting and prayer, which is why Joel 2:12-19, the prophet's summons to "sanctify a fast," has for centuries been read in the West on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten observance. Lenten appeals to Joel are hardly limited to the West, however. In the Paschal Letter that Athanasius of Alexandria wrote at the beginning of Lent in 329, he cited that same text of Joel (**Epistolae** 1.4). Indeed, it has always been proper, in both East and West, to invoke Joel with respect to repentance at any time. Leo I of Rome cited that same passage in a sermon delivered during the September Ember Days (**Sermones** 88.1), and Gregory the Theologian elaborated it in a lengthy series of comments on the prophets (**Orationes** 2.59).

Joel, however, knew about other things besides repentance and fasting. He especially foresaw and foretold the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit as a defining sign of the final times. Thus, on the morning of Pentecost, it was to Joel that the Church first turned to describe and interpret her own new existence in the world and the beginnings of her ministry to the nations.

For this reason, the Fathers of the Church found a goodly measure of the Gospel right there in the Book of Joel. Do we search for the Incarnation? Irenaeus of Lyons believed that when Joel proclaimed, "The Lord also will roar from Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem" (3:16), Christ "specified the place of His coming" (**Adversus Haereses** 3.20.4). Or the Church? Cyprian of Carthage sees her in Joel's reference (2:16) to the Bride coming forth from her chamber (**Testimonia** 19). Salvation by faith? Because the apostle Peter (Acts 2:21) quoted Joel's very words-"Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (2:32)-to this effect, wrote John Chrysostom, "We know that he foretold salvation through faith, for he did not remain silent on this point" (**Homiliae in Actus** 5). Baptism? Theophanes the Hymnographer wrote, "As Joel prophesied, rivers of miracles, which are the all-glorious apostles of the Lord, pour forth remission upon Judah, watering those who cry, 'Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord'" (Eighth Ode in second tone for October 19). But Joel more especially spoke of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It was to Joel, consequently, that Justin Martyr turned to speak of those "gifts which, from the grace of that Spirit's power, He gives to those who believe in Him, as He thinks each one worthy" (**Dialogue** 87).

It is significant that the message of Joel, proclaimed at both the beginning of Lent and the end of the Paschal season, sets the tone for the most important period of the Church's liturgical year.

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