

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

4th December 2016

Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

Spirit... may we dream dreams and share visions... may we speak of things hoped for and times yet to be... may we see beyond where we are... but may we begin here and now... in the inspiration and intent that comes meeting us here... So be it... Amen

I wonder if you can work out what Sigur Ros... Icelandic post-pop group... Radiohead... English Rock Band... and Gustav Mahler the Austrian late-Romantic composer all have in common...

It's okay I'll tell you... but before I do... let me say that most of us have probably come to a deep appreciation of their music... because they all play some of the tracks used as the soundtrack to David Attenborough's Planet Earth II... It's not your normal combination of music... but then Planet Earth II is not your normal programme... and many here... like me... sit fascinated... enthralled... and not a little startled... as we are swept up into the stories of this yet still incredible world we have... thanks in part to Sigur Ros... Radiohead and Mahler...

I can't remember what the music was last Sunday as we watched the Diaries part of the programme... that last ten or twelve minutes... where we witness how the animals were filmed... If you remember they were chasing a locust swarm... and by a combination of floods... rain and heavy rivers... circumstances unexpectedly led them to film... the biggest swarm that had ever been recorded...

A billion locusts... tore through thousands of tonnes of vegetation daily... and Joel the prophet... not exactly David Attenborough of his day... writes of a similar event... before his more hopeful word we read today... except he doesn't put it down to natural circumstances... He claims it was God...

And there perhaps... the soundtrack of Mahler or Radiohead might suddenly stop... and we say... "Wait a minute... God?"...

Joel is a prophet... who probably isn't talking about locusts... He talks about a ten year stint of locust swarms... so is likely using a metaphor here... talking about a series of invading armies... who... like locusts... have ruined the land...

That might make it a little easier to compute... but just before Mahler begins playing again... the problem surely has grown... Joel now says it is God who has invited these armies in... because God's own folk... the chosen ones... haven't lived up to being the chosen ones... and this is God's judgement on them...

Maybe we need to put on some cold Icelandic post-pop from Sigur Ros... and just think about that... because the implication is God organises... invasion and war... hunger and famine... and by extension... a whole lot of other painful stuff that affects all of us all the time... as judgement... simply because imperfect humans make imperfect choices in an imperfect world...

Aleppo?... your heart breaks for that city... and the images we have seen... How many times is that story repeated in folk we know... who have faced in their own way... the very worst in life... for no good reason... while others grow fat on little else but good luck...

Surely we stand aghast at what some suggest... who should absolutely know better... the idea these things are God's judgement on us...

But my friends... not everyone believes these are God's punishment or have much to do with God at all... not every person of faith... and I mean every faith... believes this is God's judgement... It is some almighty dysfunctional religion that suggests that might be true...

These things happen but the most honest way of talking of these things is to be honest with self and with God...

The truth is... there is no clever answer... there is nothing neat and tidy that anyone can say... no faith of any version... provides any answer... because answers do not come out of faith... Faith shapes questions... faith learns from experience... faith grows by wisdom... and insight... but there are no answers...

So what are we left with... what kind of God do we want to offer Thomas... our parish... our neighbours...

Well... for what it is worth... many are more inclined to believe in a God who interacts with the world in love... a love that shares all that happens by being our companion through everything... rather than sitting on the sidelines in judgement... More are inclined to speak of God... as love... revealed each time light breaks through the cracks of our relationships...

For example... we have continually been able to be very generous as a congregation... The gifts we've collected today are case in point... This is a generosity of generations... most recently perhaps towards refugees...

And in our refugee response group... we met Safina... from Aleppo a while back... who for the first time told her story... She stuttering through her English as she told her story... tears rolling down her face... while tears rolled down everyone else's... none of us could help it... but we didn't and couldn't solve or fix anything... but we could share Safina's suffering... Sharing suffering may not make sense of the pain... but it halves it...

It is in these moments... for me... I believe in God most... It's where I imagine I meet God as God really is... where the light gets in through the cracks... and the pain is halved... where God *is* the love... that moves with us... without abandoning... through whatever any of us goes through... I'm not going to peddle an answer... faith doesn't do answers... faith is a way of living... revealing love... revealing God... in the world... in the cracks...

And Joel... while a prophet of judgement... is also one of hope... where hope... is something to trust... something to believe... to hold... sing... dream... and shape vision...

God... love... is the presence that takes us through times of locusts... and offers it's own sound track... and Joel offers such a song... I shall pour out my spirit on all... your young shall dream dreams... you old will see visions... slave and free alike...

It's love's constant chorus for those who have ears... And if you can't hear it right now... others do... and will love you through... This is what we do... our companionship in others suffering... to dream... to have vision... that moves us beyond where we are... It is our gift

to do that... for those who cannot... to hold the vision... to carry folk towards it... to shift the world out of darkness... and seek the light...

It is the gift of advent... which is one long soundtrack for the world... that sings of hope... of peace... of incarnation... of love who put on flesh to share these journeys... not Sigur Ros but Joel, Isaiah, Zechariah, John...

The invitation is to dare give this soundtrack to the world... for Aleppo... and the hungry... the suffering... each of us... to Thomas... to neighbour... to parish... God is not judging... God is coming... and whose advent is to be seen already... as love... enfleshed... through the companionship and compassion we offer each another... enough to change the journey we share...