Sermon for 16th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Amos 8:1-12; Colossians 1: 15-28; Luke 10:38-42.

i

A basket full of beautiful, ripe fruit would normally be a picture of plenty and contentment. Not so for Amos. To Amos the picture of plenty is a harbinger of famine and scarcity.

Perhaps there is some logic to this. So often we have seen how the economic cycle overheats to a huge, unsustainable binge of over-indulgence, before plunging into the depths of recession. So Amos is right. Abundance can be the sign of scarcity to come.

Amos was looking at the situation he found in the northern kingdom of Israel in the mid-eighth century before Christ through the eyes of a visiting businessman. He was horrified at the materialistic excess of the society he found. Merchants couldn’t wait for the Sabbath to be over to commence trading again; they cheated, sold chaff in the wheat, scammed people with false weights and measures and generally were so absorbed about making money, their morality and their religious faith fell by the wayside.

This is a depressingly familiar picture.

Amos recognises that this is undermining the foundations of Israel. Economic excess, exploitation of the poor and a divided society between the haves and the have-nots are not just matters for trendy left-of-centre clergy to inveigh from the pulpit, because such moral vacuity hollows out society’s ability to withstand any economic or political ill-wind. Morality has measurable repercussions.

For Israel, the ill-wind was about to blow from the north. Within a few years of Amos’ warning, possibly within as little as ten years, Israel would be challenged by their aggressive northern neighbour, Assyria. Israel would collapse almost overnight.

Israel would indeed be swept away as if caught in the massive flooding of the river Nile. The sun would go dark at noon time, for it would disappear behind billowing black smoke. Festival would indeed turn into funeral.

Yet at the crucial hour of need, they would not be able to find the Word of the Lord.

No one has time for God’s Word when they are caught up in a frenzy of making money. No one wants to stop the party by asking searching questions about the morality of what is going on.

But the party does stop one day. There is a time of reckoning. When society is shaken to its core and the political and economic pillars start to crumble, it is in those moments that people search for a new teaching, a renewed vision, and a new set of values by which to live. In times of geo-political upheaval God is suddenly seen as a firm anchor in the rising flood.

But those who have lost touch with God in the happy, carefree days of plenty often cannot find their way back to God in a crisis. For they have abandoned that path for just too long. It is now hidden from their view and they cast around in vain for a way back to solid ground and a fresh start.

ii

There is a similar lesson to be learnt from our reading from Luke 10:38-42.

Martha is doing exactly what society expects of her – she is preparing the meal. She is getting on with normal life.

But normal life needs to be put on hold for a moment. It is not a normal day when Jesus comes to your house. There is nothing wrong with cooking a meal, but there is everything wrong with it if that takes precedence on such a unique occasion. There’ll be plenty of time later for cooking.

Mary is commended by Jesus for having understood the wonderful opportunity she has that day. She forgets the normal routine and sits and listens to Jesus.

This is quite remarkable for a woman to be permitted to act in such a way. To sit at the feet of Jesus was to enjoy the role of a student learning from their master. Such privileges were usually reserved for men. Luke, however, is keen throughout his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles, to show women within the Christian community breaking through the old gender stereotypes. Luke even calls it Martha’s home – rather than Lazarus’ home. There is no mention of Lazarus at all in this passage.

Mary’s role is misunderstood if it is taken to be that of a passive female dutifully sitting at the feet of a superior male. The very opposite is true. Luke is showing us that Mary is being prepared as a pupil so that one day she may become a teacher and leader herself. What Luke is depicting here is not a traditionally submissive role for Mary, but an iconoclastically empowering one.

When Paul declared there is neither male nor female in Christ, he was following the radical example set by Jesus and his followers. The tension throughout apostolic times and to this day is how to balance the ideals of the kingdom of God with what is socially acceptable at the time to enable the Church to survive long enough to change society. The fact that men have a vested interest in accommodating worldly rather than kingdom values is a sad commentary on the reach of the Holy Spirit upon our masculine hearts.

Jesus is telling Martha that she too can enjoy this new status. Life should not just carry on in the normal way – for Jesus is here. His presence makes all the difference. The world itself should not just carry on with ‘business as usual’ – for Jesus is here and that should change everything.

There simply has to be more to life than making money and enjoying the material things of this world. “Do not store up treasure on earth,” said Jesus. It is a lesson many have yet to learn.

iii

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians we get a glimpse of why normal life should be put on hold whilst the world pays heed to Jesus.

Jesus is ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15), and ‘by him all things were created’ (Col 1:16) and ‘in him all things hold together’ (Col 1:17). Jesus reveals the inner truth of the cosmos. Normal life, therefore, cannot be healthy and purposeful unless it encompasses the divine principle running through creation: God is love.

Now in Christ the secret principle of life has been revealed: that with Christ in us, we have the hope of glory (Col 1:27). This is now Paul’s mission in life, to spread the Good News of what is now possible for the whole world through Christ.

Paul exerts himself daily in this ministry. He suffers many hardships which will one day culminate in taking his life. Before then, he will know hunger, exhaustion, disputation and danger. It is thought he may have travelled 10,000 miles over 30 years.

Yet of those 30 or so years of ministry, for around a third of them, Paul is apparently invisible. After his call on the Damascus Road in the early 30s AD, he seems more or less to disappear until the mid- 40’s AD when he commences his First Missionary Journey, as we usually call it. Whilst scholars differ concerning the precise details, most accept that there is a kind of silent apprenticeship being served by Paul before he becomes active in mission. It is Paul’s time to sit at the feet of Jesus (or at least at the feet of more experienced Christians) and learn the meaning of Christ’s death and Resurrection.

Jesus deserves a hearing. We should be prepared to set time aside to think about who he is, and what that means for our lives, if what Christians say about Jesus is true.

The Church makes vast claims for Christ. To choose Christ or to reject Christ is not like choosing your next house or smart phone. Yet many people will give far more time and attention to choosing either of those than they will give to hearing what Jesus has to say to them and working out whether or not they believe it to be true.

Christians believe that to align your life with Christ is to choose the better part. There is no sounder choice, because we believe Christ expresses the mind of God and the heart of God that lie at the centre of creation. If that is true, then no life, no matter how outwardly fruitful and blessed with material riches, has any lasting value, unless it is built upon the one true foundation which upholds the universe itself.

That is no small claim. Much hangs on whether you believe that to be true or not. At the very least, it surely merits you stop your frantic life for a moment to listen and think about what Jesus claims he can do for you and for the world.

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