

PENTECOST 6C 21072019 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Amos 8. 1-12; Ps 52; Colossians 1. 15-29; Luke 10. 38-42

Amos 8.1-12

This is what the Lord God showed me—a basket of summer fruit.
He said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A basket of summer fruit.’ Then the Lord said to me,
‘The end has come upon my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by.
The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day,’
says the Lord God ;
‘the dead bodies shall be many,
cast out in every place. Be silent!’
Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, ‘When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practise deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’
The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.
Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who lives in it,
and all of it rise like the Nile,
and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?
On that day, says the Lord God ,
I will make the sun go down at noon,
and darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your feasts into mourning,
and all your songs into lamentation;
I will bring sackcloth on all loins,
and baldness on every head;
I will make it like the mourning for an only son,
and the end of it like a bitter day.
The time is surely coming, says the Lord God ,
when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord .
They shall wander from sea to sea,
and from north to east;
they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord ,
but they shall not find it.

Colossians 1.15-29

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

Luke 10.38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

SERMON

There is a tension revealed in the Bible readings for today, which might be experienced as the attempt to balance activity with contemplation. There is a lot of talk these days about work-life balance, as people try to find enough time for leisure, home and family while work demands increase.

The particular balance we are looking at here is the balance of doing and being, and it is a challenge for many Christians. How do I follow Jesus? 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?', as the lawyer asked Jesus in last Sunday's gospel. Does following Jesus mean I have to do this that and the other; is it more about praying, reading the Bible and spending time with God; or is it both?

The story of the two sisters, Mary and Martha, is well known to us; but it hasn't always been interpreted in helpful ways.

Martha was fed up with being left with all the dinner preparations while her sister sat and listened to Jesus, so understandably she complained to him. Jesus gently rebuked Martha and said Mary had made the better choice.

But **SOMEBODY** had to cook dinner! I can just imagine Martha thinking to herself, 'That's all very well but people need to be fed, we can't all sit around being waited on...' I can imagine it because I think that's how I would respond.

Unfortunately, some have concluded that this means that 'women's work' - making meals- is not as important or 'spiritual' as sitting at the feet of Jesus. Mary is seen as learning submissively, being sedate and devout, and Martha as aggressively fussy while she does her 'women's work'. So neither portrayal is a helpful model for women.

However, what Mary was doing had nothing to do with being submissive: she was doing what the men did. Men and boys sat at the feet of their teachers to learn, and Mary wanted to join in- and Jesus affirmed her choice. Martha's offer of hospitality was also important, but her distraction and worry about 'many things' was taking away her capacity to be with Jesus, her guest.

I read about the concept of 'Scruffy Hospitality' a while ago, and thought it was wonderful. The woman who wrote the piece had realised that, while she loved entertaining people in her home, she spent so much time cleaning and tidying and cooking, making everything perfect, that she'd be exhausted afterwards. She would put off having people over because the garden needed work, or the painting wasn't finished....

Then she realised that people didn't come to see her tidy rooms or immaculate garden- they came to see HER. So she began to invite people over, and deliberately didn't do all the housework first. It took a while, but gradually she found she was far more relaxed and enjoying time with friends and family much more. There is a lesson in this for all of us, and perhaps Martha needed to hear it too. Hospitality is a vital part of the Christian life, as we welcome people to God's Table on Sundays but also as we spend time with people outside of church. I commend scruffy hospitality to you all!

Amos the prophet had to speak God's words of harsh criticism to his countrymen and women. They were corrupt in their business dealings, exploiting the poor, ignoring the Sabbath and generally behaving very badly- and God had had enough.

Amos warned them that they faced a famine- not of food or water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. He was describing a sort of spiritual emptiness, a hunger and thirst that could not be quenched, as they searched for God and for meaning but would find none. This sounds quite contemporary, doesn't it?

What the letter to the Colossians says is an answer to this desperate longing of the heart.

In the words of New Testament Scholar NT Wright, Jesus is described as 'the image of the invisible God, the sound of the inaudible God and the touch of the untouchable God'. Jesus is the answer to our questions, the end of our search, the one who fills our emptiness.

In our search for balance, our need to both do and be, the answer lies in Jesus. He spent hours in solitary prayer, and hours teaching and conversing with people.

He relaxed with his friends, and he worked hard to meet the needs of everyone who asked him for help. Our world needs people who can do and people who can be; and we all need a mixture of both. If we spend all our time running around doing stuff- even if it is really good stuff like helping others or fundraising or whatever- then where is our relationship with God? And if we spend all our time in prayer, when are we reaching out to those in need?

Our world needs prayer. Terrible things are happening daily and there is so much suffering and need. And our world needs action as well, because people need help; so as followers of Jesus we do what we can with what we have.

God has given us different gifts and abilities, and in every congregation there is a mix and a balance. There are people who have boundless energy and can do all sorts of practical things, and there are people who are physically inactive but can pray a lot. God uses all of us, and all are needed.

We must never lose our focus, in all the activities of being church. We must take time to be still, to learn and pray and experience God's love, because it is God's work that will grow the church. We need to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to the one who is the head of the body, the church.

The Lord be with you.