

PENTECOST 5C 10-07-2022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*
Amos 7.7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1.1-14; Luke 10.25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Today's Old Testament and Gospel readings are not kind in their portrayal of clergy; which is fair enough, I get that too many clergy over too many years have behaved so badly that it's no wonder we get a bad rap. There is a nice bit of relief in the letter to the Colossians, when the writer praises Epaphras and calls him a faithful minister. Apart from that, today feels like 'bash the clergy' day.

First of all we have the prophet Amos, who by the sounds of it didn't set out to be a prophet, it wasn't his chosen profession, but God called him into it. When he prophesied that God was going to judge the people of Israel who were once again wandering off-course, the King's priest had a go at him, telling him to go away and prophesy somewhere else.

Then we hear from Luke's Gospel that just after the seventy disciples had come back from their successful preaching mission, Jesus was approached by a lawyer- an expert in the Law of Moses- and asked a couple of ridiculous questions to test him.

This learned person probably knew the Law back to front and inside out: the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and all the rules and laws they contained. He didn't ask Jesus about eternal life from a genuine desire to learn; he asked because he assumed he already knew better than Jesus. There's another unpleasant religious professional.

You may have caught the results of the latest Australian Census which demonstrated the decline in religious affiliation. There are many reasons why people today will say they have no religion, and why people who once attended church don't any more.

The Royal Commission exposed the horrors of child abuse that has happened in churches and church establishments, resulting in an understandable loss of trust in churches and clergy. Whatever status or good standing in the community clergy may have previously enjoyed or expected is gone- and perhaps that's a good thing. We all need to earn trust and not expect it as a right.

Back to today's two great stories with their memorable images.

The plumb line image is used by Amos as an example of perfect straightness and alignment. Today builders use spirit levels to check their work, but they weren't invented in the time of Amos; apparently still today they can be used when building a chimney to indicate whether a flue is running true vertical or veering off plumb. (I looked that up).

Amos was an ordinary man who was given the extraordinary job of declaring God's judgement on those with power. He told them that God's patience had come to an end, and the people of Israel would be defeated in battle and exiled to Babylon. And why was God so fed up with them?

Because their society claimed to have divine favour but lived off the backs of the poor. They were unjust and wouldn't change.

Martin Luther King quoted from Amos in speeches and sermons, proclaiming "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

He saw that American racism was- and still is- rooted in a political economy indifferent to the poor. A moral economy of exploitation and misery cannot be just in the sight of God.

Recent history in the United States shows that this is still a racially divided community, still discriminating against people of colour and still oppressing the poor. Adding readily available guns into the mix is a recipe for the disaster we are witnessing.

But before we smugly reflect that thank goodness, Australia isn't like that, we must remember that this country also has a record of discrimination and violence.

This NAIDOC week has reminded us again that the First Peoples of Australia were treated appallingly, classed as flora and fauna, and are still suffering the long-term effects of trauma and dispossession, in common with others whose countries were colonised.

When we hear the parable of the Good Samaritan we all know which one is the good neighbour, the one who stops to help on a notoriously dangerous road; and we all know who **doesn't** stop to help or even to cross the road and check. It's the clergy- again! Heavy sigh....

Everyone familiar with this parable- which is probably everyone- knows that Jesus was making a not-so-subtle point to that lawyer who asked, 'And who is my neighbour?'

That two Jewish religious leaders, who were dedicated to holy living and held in high regard by their communities, would be so concerned for their personal safety or ritual purity that they wouldn't attempt to help a fellow Judean, would have been shocking enough for the lawyer to hear.

Then to be told that the person who DID help, who went above and beyond to care for a stranger, was one of those despicable heretics from Samaria- well. That's hammering home the point all right.

Just to make sure he'd got it, Jesus asked the lawyer, 'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' What else could he say but, 'The one who showed him mercy.' I bet he said it very quietly. Then Jesus told him to go and do likewise.

The point Jesus is making is not who deserves to be cared for- the lawyer's question- but that we are to become people who will treat EVERYONE we encounter with compassion. We are to show mercy to whoever needs it, however scary or different they are. WE are to be good neighbours.

What these two extraordinary stories from Amos and Jesus have in common is that they are both about justice and mercy. Separated from each other by hundreds of years and by millennia from today they still have much to teach us.

We need to pray for those in our new government that they will learn God's way of justice, kindness and compassion.

Speaking of kindness: in our family, we all love Dr Who. In one of my favourite speeches by the Twelfth Doctor, played by Peter Capaldi, he said this as he confronted his best friends and his worst enemies: *"I do what I do because it's right! Because it's decent! And above all, it's kind! It's just that. Just kind. Why not, just at the end, just be kind?"*

That sums up so much of what Jesus was always talking about- particularly in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Be kind.

And pray for ourselves, the church and its clergy, that we will never forget that our purpose is to love God, which is to love neighbour, which is to love God. And always: to be kind.

The Lord be with you.