

Readings for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

17th July 2022

First Reading: 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 in 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.

Second Reading: Colossians 1:15-28

Christ 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.

Gospel: St Luke 10:38-42

Now as Jesus and his disciples 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 Jesus 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.'

A Reflection for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

A line from today's Gospel: 'Martha was distracted by her many tasks'. How many of us can empathise with that feeling, I wonder? Quite a few of us, I imagine, in various different contexts. Extending the hospitality of our homes to friends and family is something many of us enjoy, but we probably all know the busyness of getting everything ready and of preparing a special meal.

In some cultures, even today, hospitality to not only friends but also strangers is still highly valued. I have spoken before of how, when I was teaching, we had a school partnership in rural Malawi which I had the privilege of visiting on a number of occasions. In that culture, when anyone comes to the house, the expectation is that food will be provided to welcome them, even though this takes a while to prepare – and one is expected to wait until it is ready. Since one of the tasks the school there had asked me to do was to visit the many village chiefs to emphasise the importance of education, particularly for girls, I got offered many such meals. I quickly learned not to eat too much in any one place as this might be the first of three or even four lunches that day! I also became a vegetarian in an attempt to prevent people who have so much less than we do killing their precious chickens to provide a special meal for me, the one least in need of it. They thought this was very strange but the chickens lived to see another day, providing eggs and later a meal for the family ... or another visitor.

Similarly, when Jesus and his entourage came to Martha's house, Martha set about fulfilling the ancient Jewish tradition of hospitality that extended to friends and strangers alike. It is assumed that Jesus and his friends will stay and eat, and that meant making the necessary preparations.

In this section of Luke's Gospel, as Jesus travels from Galilee to Jerusalem, he teaches his followers what it means to be a disciple. As part of this, hospitality is a recurring theme. You may remember, three weeks ago we heard that, as he set out on that journey, Jesus was not welcomed by a Samaritan village – they did not extend hospitality to him. But Jesus himself endorsed the practice of hospitality: two weeks ago, when he sent out the seventy ahead of him on the way, he told them to accept the hospitality of those who welcomed them, to eat and drink what was provided, just as he done earlier when he sent out the twelve. And last week, we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan, where he extended hospitality to the man who had been robbed and beaten by caring for him and ensuring that he was provided for.

Biblical hospitality was a sacred duty and involved treating friends and strangers alike, welcoming all into homes and lives. Hospitality, in its widest sense, is an important demonstration of the values of God's kingdom. Disciples of Jesus are called to practise their faith by living out its values, and that includes following the spirit of those values, not just following a set of rules. In today's passage from Amos, we see God's righteous anger expressed at unjust business practice as some people tried to manipulate God's Law for their own ends. They were impatient over God's sabbath, cheating God of the attention due to him. By making the ephah, a measure of dry goods such as wheat, small and the shekel, a measure of silver, great, they were cheating people of what they were rightfully entitled to. And by buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, they were abusing their power over the poor and vulnerable. God's response is severe. God expects his people to extend hospitality, in its widest sense to all, but especially to those least able to provide for themselves. To live out the values of God's kingdom rather than protecting our own interests.

So, if hospitality was so important in Jewish society, and Jesus affirmed its importance, and Martha was apparently trying to fulfil that ideal of welcoming hospitality, why does Jesus appear to devalue what she is doing? I'll come back to that, but first let's take a look at Mary.

We are not told a great deal about Mary in this passage, and, unlike Martha, she doesn't speak. All we are told is that she sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him. Mary is demonstrating a receptive response to Jesus' teaching which is another important aspect of discipleship. Jesus taking time to teach his disciples is another enduring characteristic of his ministry and of this journey from Galilee to Jerusalem as he prepared them for what was to come and for their future ministries.

Disciples need to learn who Jesus is and what that means for their lives. Paul recognised the importance of this and, in today's passage from the letter to the Colossians, he describes how Christ, who was there, one with God at creation, is also the one who reconciles, leading creation back to its divinely ordained order. That's the big picture, and then he zooms in to the personal – the 'you'. Christ reconciles us too if we remain faithful to the hope of the Gospel. Paul continues Jesus' pattern of teaching, saying of his own ministry at the end of today's passage that he was 'teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ', that is, so they learn.

Returning to the story of Martha and Mary, as we see the different responses of the two sisters to Jesus, it may seem to us that Martha is conforming to a gender stereotype: a woman's place is in the kitchen. However, although she may be embodying that stereotype in working to provide a meal, she is surprisingly vocal in challenging Jesus, not so typical of women at that time. And while Mary may seem the more liberated, sitting at Jesus' feet listening to and learning from him, a place that would normally be reserved for men, she is portrayed here as mute and perhaps somewhat passive.

It's tempting to look at this passage in a binary way, that Mary did the right thing and, by implication, Martha did not. But, like most situations, I think it is more subtle and complex than that. I asked the question earlier: if Martha was fulfilling the ideal of welcoming hospitality, why does Jesus appear to devalue what she is doing? I don't think he does. Jesus doesn't say that Martha has done the wrong thing, he simply says that Mary has chosen the better part on this occasion. Mary has chosen to listen to Jesus; she has taken advantage of the opportunity to learn from the very lips of God. And, although she didn't seize the same opportunity, this doesn't invalidate what Martha has been doing.

Martha and Mary represent different aspects of what it means to be a disciple, and we need both Martha and Mary characteristics in our lives as we listen to Jesus, learn from him, and live out our faith in actions that extend hospitality in its broadest sense to others.

‘Martha was distracted by her many tasks’. She was overwhelmed by her ‘to-do’ list and it obscured her sight of the opportunity that was in front of her. Sound familiar? It does to me and I’m sure it will to some of you too. That’s not wrong, but the important thing is to recognise that this can happen and, being so aware, we are more able to seize the opportunities to redress the balance when they do present themselves.