

## Readings for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

20<sup>th</sup> July 2025

### 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**

*from Ven John Green*

When Reverend Clare suggested I preach this Sunday, I suspect that she hadn't looked at the readings which were set for today; when she did perhaps she may have let out a little sigh! Given all that is happening in the world today, the Old Testament reading from the prophet Amos looks like a perfect excuse for a good old rant about the current state of things; and, as a man of a certain age, I find a good rant comes increasingly easily! But, before getting stuck in, let's pause a moment to think about who Amos was and why he's important.

Amos's prophecies date from around 765 BC, towards the end of a fairly long period of peace and prosperity (at least for some). His writings are important because they mark a shift away from the professional prophets who were willing to write flattering oracles for the right price, to the great line of prophets like Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, whose authority came from their divine call, and who were willing (indeed, felt compelled) to tell difficult truths. Amos explicitly says that he "...is not a prophet or the son of a prophet," but identifies himself as a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees who received a divine call to prophecy while following his flock. So Amos isn't prophesying to make a living, saying things that will please his audience – he's telling the truth as he sees it.

Amos received his message in a series of visions, and the images are laced with Hebrew puns. But the basic message is very simple: at a time when a section of Hebrew society was doing very well, living in large houses, eating fine food and generally living in opulence, there was widespread corruption and exploitation of the poor by the wealthy. The message is stark; the people had lost their way and had sinned against God and there would be consequences – punishment! However, Amos also offers some hope – although calamity is coming, if the nation seeks God and re-establishes justice, God may be merciful to a remnant of the nation.

So, on to the rant .... or perhaps not! While it's easy to get angry that the same evils and injustices for which the Hebrew people stood to be punished are being re-enacted all around us, it's almost always a mistake to see divine words of judgement as being directed at '*them*' rather than '*us*'. Tempting as it is to call out the evils and injustices being enacted by the Trumps, Netanyahus and numberless tyrants of this world, they are symptoms of the problem rather than the disease itself.

There is a way of looking at biblical prophecy as somehow predicting a future that is now coming to pass. Did God give Amos and his ilk a glimpse of the future and a mission to record a warning for generations to come; or is the truth a lot simpler – that human society has always struggled to discern how things should be ordered? The rulers of Amos's Israel had reason for thinking they were doing a good job, after all they had avoided ruinous wars and there was prosperity – and surely generating wealth was a good thing because it must trickle down to the poor! But whether it is for Amos's King Jereboam II or Donald Trump or Benjamin Netanyahu or Kier Starmer – the question remains the same, "For whose benefit should things be ordered?"

But that question of what is best for our people – or, crucially, what is right – isn't just something for our leaders to ponder. Directly or indirectly, to a lesser or greater extent, we all help shape the society in which we live, we and our forebears before us. If we've come to the view that material prosperity is the star to follow over all others – if that's how we've brought up our children to measure their 'success', if self-interest is the yardstick we use when electing our leaders – then we all have a degree of responsibility for the world in which we find ourselves.

If that's true, and I believe it is, perhaps what's more chilling is how many of our decisions and judgements are effectively made on '*autopilot*' – how often we're willing to adopt the norms and standards of society around us without question or thought. After all, for many of us the demands of every day life, of keeping everything together, are more than enough without trying to unpick the moral basis of our society. What *star* are we following in our decisions and aspirations? I suggest we often don't know – we're just going with everyone else hoping that somewhere at the front, someone is following something worthwhile!

And so we come to the story that Luke tells of Jesus's visit to the sisters Mary and Martha. Martha is the practical sister, busy and pre-occupied with all the things that need to be done and resents Mary's decision to stop what she's doing and listen to what Jesus has to say.

There are a number of ways at looking at the story, remembering, in particular, Luke's habit of relating events in a way that questions people's expectations. For instance, the difference between the two sisters could symbolise two different approaches to faith – one is pre-occupied with rites and ceremonies (you could say *doing*) while the other is about enjoying being in the presence of God (you could say just *being*). But I certainly think there is a call here to step away from all that we do unthinkingly in everyday life and think about it in the light of what Jesus has to say.

If you'll excuse a rather bizarre image from modern life, you might say Martha is someone on a journey who's interested in doing what the satnav tells her to do each step of the way – turn left here, bear right there – while Mary is more bothered about the bigger *map* – where is she in relation to everything else, and where is she actually going. Satnavs are a great help in getting from A to B (at least most of the time) but we've all heard stories of people ending up in difficulties from slavishly following directions which make no sense. But, more than that, just following directions takes away an appreciation of the journey – an understanding of the terrain being travelled through, what interesting places might be nearby and what risks there might be. You could say it takes away the agency of the driver and the ability to make decisions about the route. Perhaps the best way to use a satnav is to see it as giving reminders of the twists and turns of a journey that you've taken time to think about in advance.

No doubt, there will be time for Mary to engage in the routine business of life and of running a household, but Jesus's visit is a time to stand back and reflect on what underlies all the busyness. It's a time not to follow routine, or blindly

to follow everyone else – it's a time to recognise the uniqueness of this Teacher from Nazareth, and to see him as The One to follow.

In the New Testament reading from the letter to the Colossians, Paul makes no bones about the uniqueness of Jesus. It seems that there was, in the Church at Colossae, a faction that had developed a cult of angels together with specific dietary rules and religious practices that challenged the uniqueness of Christ in reconciling humanity with God. You might say there was something of *Mary and Martha* about it. What was important, what led to salvation, what is the unique thing to which Christians can lay claim? To Paul (as to Luke) the answer is **not** religious practice and ritual – not *doing* things – but in the person and presence of Jesus Christ.

So what do these passages from scripture have to say to us, here today, living in a world which seems to be hopelessly drifting towards destruction? To me they say three things.

The first is not to rant. The message of the prophets is not to judge others but to accept God's judgement of ourselves, to recognise our collective responsibility for how things are, to repent and recognise our utter reliance on God's forgiveness.

The second is to understand the uniqueness of Christ. That in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, through *his* words and works, the fulness of God is revealed. Perhaps the biggest service that Christians can offer to our world is to seek to follow the direction that Jesus gives us and bear witness to the love we believe to be at the centre of creation. All too often, the Church has sought to impose its way of doing things on society, pre-occupied with externals and using the tools of earthly authority, rather than seeking to show the presence of the risen Christ through acts of service and love.

The third is not to abandon hope. Not only are events on the world stage alarming, but there is a worrying trend for commentators and politicians to foretell rebellion and social disaster for their own ends, and by their words, stir up the very things they claim to dread. One sure way of crashing a car is to cry, "We're going to crash!" and take your hands off the steering wheel! For Christians the cry is not, "We're all going to perish!" – but that "...through [Jesus] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." There's no doubt that we're living through difficult, challenging and frightening times. There's little doubt that things are going to get worse before they get better. But the message of those three passages is, to me, take hope in the uniqueness of Jesus – seek to spend time in his presence, to follow him, and to see him as a guiding light for how you understand the world.

Perhaps the last word should go to Jesus – from St John's Gospel (John 16:33 – New King James Version). *"These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."* Amen, Amen, Amen!