

ADDRESS 17 July 2016

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 8. 1-12 The basket of fruit
 Psalm 52 Judgment on the deceitful
 Colossians 1.15-29 The supremacy of Christ
 Luke 10.38-42 Jesus visits Martha and Mary

Open our minds, O Lord, to hear and understand your Word, and open our hearts to do your will. We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.

Recently I saw a movie in which a woman asks her religious brother to tell her what this religion stuff is all about. So he gives her a little paperback of Mathew's gospel. You see her starting to read it -- chapter 1: *Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob, and Jacob begat Judah, and Judah . . .* and so on and so on, for 15 verses. She throws the book down, in disgust. Too many characters, too little plot! The Bible needs to be read with our brain in gear.

Sometimes it is hard to see any connection between the passages the lectionary authorises for each Sunday. Like today. We began with the prophet Amos reporting a vision of the summer fruit and denouncing his people for oppressing the poor, by giving short weight, and by debasing the coinage. This, of course, caused big rises in the price of the bare necessities, like flour and oil. The poor were the ones to suffer. Just as the trees yield their fruit when the time comes, Amos warns, this evil-doing will result in devastating punishment from God

In the Hebrew, the sentence is a play on words – the word for 'fruit' sounds very like the word for 'end'. Just as summer is the end of the growing cycle, when the fruit is harvested, so Israel is moving towards the end of its time as a nation. As the fruit is plucked from the tree, so Israel will be plucked from her land. And when this time of retribution comes, the people will search the land, from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea, from Dan to Beersheba, looking for hope from God's Word, but they won't find any hope, because greed has made them blind. This is the message that needs to be heard at the board meetings of some companies and at some union meetings! In the eyes of God, greed is not good.

Then we heard Paul's hymn of praise to Jesus, the image of the invisible God. So poetic is this passage that some scholars believe that Paul may have been quoting an early Christian hymn, just as he clearly does in one or two of his other letters. Paul had not seen Jesus, but he had encountered him through the Holy Spirit, just as we can, and he had given up his old ways to serve him, just as we are called to do.

Today's short Gospel records one of Jesus' visits to the home of Martha and Mary in the village of Bethany, just to the east of Jerusalem. There is no mention of their brother Lazarus in this story,

but the gospel writer tells us Jesus was not alone . When Mary opened her door, surprise! There were probably more than 15 people at the door. There was Jesus, and the 12 disciples, and the women who accompanied and supported them, and perhaps other followers as well. They had arrived without notice, because in those days there were no phones and no Australia Post, and no email--no way of sending an invitation or asking would a visit be convenient, visitors just turned up.

Just imagine how we would feel if we were Martha. She would have to find places for all these people to sit, and something for them to eat, and to drink; they would need a bathroom; they would need to wash their feet after walking for miles along the dusty tracks, and Martha does not seem to have had servants to help with all the chores. So she had many tasks. No wonder she was 'distracted' – this is the one time the New Testament uses the word *perispao* – which literally means being dragged around from one thing to another. The old King James version translates *perispao* by the old English word 'cumbered', and this is the origin of the hymn we sang earlier: *cumbered with a load of care*. Over-burdened. That was Martha.

But she had forgotten one thing – when people come to visit they come to see you, they want to talk to you. That is why modern houses often have open-planned living -- combined lounge-kitchen-dining rooms, or at least they have openings in the wall between the kitchen and the dining room so that the hosts can interact with the guests while dinner is being prepared and served.

When we hear this Gospel story, we tend to sympathise with Martha – she was concerned that her welcome should be worthy of Jesus and his companions. But Mary was welcoming them in her own way, by interacting with them, by listening to what Jesus had to say. The two sisters were complementing each other in their welcome, not competing. Perhaps Mary knew, in her heart, that Jesus' challenge to the authority of the temple priests would lead to his arrest and to his death. She might not have another chance to hear his message of love and redemption.

So when Martha complains that she needs help, Jesus reminds her that he had come to see her and her sister; and that she had no cause to be upset because Mary was not helping with the chores. *Perispao* suggests that Martha was taking too much trouble about things that weren't really as important as spending time with her guests. It's not easy to strike the right balance, to get the priorities right.

The story set me thinking about the things which distract us from spending time with God. There are far more of them now than there were when Jesus came into my life, more than 70 years ago – work is harder to find, shops and cinemas are open on Sundays, there is 24-hour television, and a variety of sporting and cultural activities on the weekends. These also mean that more people

have to work on Sundays these days than in the past. These changes are a challenge to make living our faith our seven-day business, not just something we save for Sundays.

We need to consider how we can make time to spend with Jesus, and not allow ourselves to be distracted. Some people bring their work home with them. Some allow their families to distract them from sharing in the spiritual and social life of the community of faith. Commitment to family comes ahead of commitment to God. Some people put golf or bowls or other sport ahead of worship; for some it is their hobbies or their toys. Some people even let the weather distract them from worship – they say it is too cold to go to church, or too hot. And some people think religion is all about church -- about raising money, or cleaning the brass, or doing the liturgy, or singing an anthem, or attending meetings, or preparing intercessions, or a sermon.

Of course, none of these is wrong, just as Martha's busyness was not wrong, but today's Gospel story reminds us that there is a better part, a better way, which we must not allow ourselves to be distracted from. That is, simply spending time with Jesus.

My son tells me the hardest thing about being a priest is making time for his own spiritual life – for quiet time, for praying the daily office, or for reading the Scriptures for any other reason than for preparing his next sermon. He is so busy helping to keep the parish going and helping other people to deal with their personal issues and their spiritual issues that he has little time to help himself, to nourish his own spiritual life. And *Southern Cross* recently had a challenging article about clergy burnout in this diocese – ministers can become so busy, so eager to help other people, so eager to please other people, that they collapse under the strain.

Yet today's psalm reminds us that those who trust in the steadfast love of God for ever and ever will themselves remain steadfast amid the storms of life.

And, in today's epistle, Paul tells us why we must not be distracted from our time with Jesus. Because Christ *himself is all things and in him all things hold together. . . . 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.* Christ is supreme.

Luke places today's Gospel story directly after the story of the Good Samaritan. Last week we heard about our call to go and do. This week we heard about our call to stay and be. The two are not competing, but complementary.

We may have heard today's story read so often that we forget how radical its message is. It was radical in its own day, because it taught that women are also called to sit at the feet of Jesus, to be

his disciples. The 16th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans shows that women had as honoured a place in the early church as men – it was only in the second and third centuries that the church became patriarchal, and still is, in most places.

Secondly, the story is radical in rejecting hierarchy – in declaring that no one service to God is more important than any other. Martha complained to Jesus that she was doing all the work – a literal translation of verse 40 is *my sister has left me to serve alone*. Martha saw only one way to serve Jesus: by doing, by keeping busy, by serving human need. Mary saw another way: by simply sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to the word of God. That is a literal translation, our translation says *listening to what he was saying*. The word of God: that should be our first priority.

The passage is too radical for many translators – a literal translation of the Greek in verse 42 is *Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her*. That's how the old King James version translated it, but some modern translators are appalled by the idea that Jesus might have been saying that all Martha's hard work was not good. If it was not good, was it bad? If it was bad, then all church busyness might be bad -- all the great buildings, all the fine liturgies, all the great music, all the fundraising, all the machinery of church administration, all the reaching out to the community. So the New Revised Standard Version in our reading sheet and the New International Version in our pews both use the word *better* rather than the word *good*.

There is a problem with a congregation which is always doing and does not make time to be, to pray and to meditate on the Scriptures, and to listen for the voice of God. That is why our meditation group and our Taizé gatherings and our Bible studies are so important -- they are worth going out at night for, even in the winter, because people need to take time to be still and know God; to know that God is, and that being God's disciple is the only thing that any of us truly need.

And why? because, as Jesus says, this is the one thing that can never be taken away from us. We can lose our family, we can lose our possessions, we can lose our health, but we cannot lose the love of God, unless we choose to reject it, unless we choose to focus on things which are temporal and ignore the things that are eternal. These are the things which cannot be taken away from us.

As I thought about all this, preparing for this morning, a wonderful text from John's Gospel came to mind -- *Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.*' (John 6.27).

That is what Jesus was telling Martha, and what he continues to tell us, through his Gospel of life.

Thanks be to God.

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