Sermon transcript 17 July 2022

St Philip Oak Bay, Rev. Canon Peter Parker

Scripture reference: Amos 8:1-12 and Luke 10:38-42

I speak to you now in the name of God, creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

I want to thank Mike for that ‘reader discretion advisory’ for that reading from Amos; it also applies, I’m sorry to say, to this most difficult sermon.

As we read that psalm this morning [Ps.52], I wonder, who amongst the powerful of the world might have come to your mind, when we said, “Why do you boast, o mighty one, of mischief done against the godly? All day long you are plotting destruction. Your tongue is like a sharp razor of treachery; you love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth.” Certainly there are a few current leaders who might come to mind. Amos had Israel’s leaders in mind when he relayed Yahweh’s fierce condemnation of those who would say, “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’ll make the ephahs small and the shekel great, and practice 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 temptation to make profits on the backs of those who have no choice but to buy is nothing new. The consumerism that we see around us, and are, with varying degrees of reluctance, a part of, is so powerful and all-pervasive that *sabbath*, our time for spiritual health, was long ago supplanted by the retail industry, the construction industry, the resource extraction industries, and the manufacturing industry which relies on machines that never stop. What Amos the prophet was decrying was not merely the buying and selling – we’ll always need to do some of that – he was exposing the greed, the corruption, and the illegal nature of these merchants, and the way that their focus, their goals, their practices, removed from them the capacity to hear God’s word and God’s truth. “’The time is surely coming,’ says the Lord God, ‘when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread or the thirst for water, but of hearing of the words of the Lord.”

This Bible that we treat as a source book for our spirituality and our ethics and our morals is not just a reliquary of ancient ideas and stories, is very much a living, dynamic document speaking truth to all ages. Amos’ description of what was happening to, and because of, the powerful elite of his day describes precisely what is happening in our own age. The worldwide growing addiction to consumer goods is poisoning our planet with plastics, greenhouse gases and deforestation, and is an addiction which blinds us to the truth of the consequences. The scientists have been warning us for decades about human-caused global warming. The extraordinary weather disasters of the last few years have been demonstrating beyond any doubt the effects of human activity on “this fragile earth, our island home”. Yet the distracting noise of making profits by manufacturing goods of questionable value and shipping them all over the planet by boat, by plane and airliner, aided by, of course clever, psychologically designed advertisements to convince us that we need those goods, deafens the world’s population to the truth. We’re now living in a terrible famine of the human race’s capacity to hear the word of the Lord.

Now, I suspect we all know this already. We probably all feel the same despair, the same overwhelmed frustration that Amos felt. Our leaders, as the psalmist said, prefer lying about these things to admitting the truth. They seem to be plotting the destruction of the only planet we have. We wonder what it is we are supposed to do.

In this context, we witness an apparently small, almost insignificant little event in a Palestinian household 2000 years ago. On the surface of it, two sisters are entertaining a dear friend, and they get crossed up over the division of labour, it seems. The little story of Martha and Mary has long been used to justify putting a higher priority on activities we list under what Jesus called, we think, “the better part” – usually activities like meditation or Bible reading or prayer, even church-going. We’ve used Martha as the classic example of someone too busy, too driven, leading an unhealthy life, needing to give herself a break. But as is often the case, we need to look a little more deeply into this scene.

In their world, Mary and Martha had a non-negotiable responsibility to provide hospitality: a welcoming place that gave water and food. Remember, this was a subsistence economy, not an upper-middle-class where people arrive at your door well fed and healthy. Martha wasn’t just “fussing” – she was fulfilling a deep-seated cultural obligation. In some ways, Mary could be justly criticized for not helping with that obligation.

But Mary, for her part, was not just being lazy – she was deliberately entering into an amazing intimacy and closeness with Jesus. For Mary, a woman, to sit at the feet of Jesus, a man and a teacher, was, in her time, nothing short of daring, a surprise to all around her. But Mary knew that she had a need, as we all do, to hear Jesus. She knew that this was an essential requirement in order to prepare for hospitality. So the issue here is one of balance. It isn’t just the division of labour in a household: it’s the balance of priorities for spiritual health.

What we see going on around us today is an almost total lack of spiritual balance. That humanity is a spiritual creation first is a truth that has been all but lost. That every human person is first a spiritual being and only then physical and mental and emotional and consumer, is a truth that has been all but lost in this busy world.

You may have heard that line that says, “A human is not a physical creature trying to have a spiritual experience; a human is a spiritual creature having a physical experience.” What Mary was doing was reminding us that we are spiritual first. That was the truth that Jesus affirmed would not be taken away from her.

The challenge, then, is to *do the work* of hospitality. Not just at our dining room table; not just in our churches and our coffee hours, but the work on the planet that will embody God’s hospitality for all people and all creatures. At the soup kitchens, at the food banks, in those desperate countries where famine is killing people daily – that justice work requires the activities of Martha without getting distracted by the social norms which tend to drive our lifestyle. Martha might have been working towards that hospitality, but her busy work, trying to adhere to the cultural norms of her day, distracted her from hearing the word of the Lord. We have to keep it the right way around, or we end up with a famine of being able to hear the truth of God’s love and compassion for all.

One of the things that God is saying, if we can hear it, is that the human race is in mortal danger on this planet. God is calling for changes to our behaviours, changes in our priorities. We all know Einstein’s definition of insanity: repeating the same behaviour and expecting a different result. We need to take the time to sit at the feet of the One who is Truth – to hear. This famine of the Word of the Lord must end. And the good news is that when we take the time to sit at the feet of Jesus, in that intimacy with our Lord, we find out that Jesus already knows the whole story. We find out that Jesus already knows us. Jesus knows our longings and he knows our fears, and he empowers us to find our balance and to work for the hospitality that the Creator desires for all the earth, all its peoples, all its creatures. Because we sit at his feet, we can do the work: we can change the world. We can change our lives. We can call out the evils and ills of our ways, and we can see and work for divine hospitality for the whole planet. For this is the better way, and it will not be taken from us.

Amen.