

**Sermon for Trinity 7 – St Bene't's, Cambridge – July 18<sup>th</sup> 2010**

**The Revd. Deborah Ford**

**Lectionary Texts: Amos 8: 1-12**

**Psalm 52**

**Colossians 1:15-28**

**Luke 10:38-end**

**“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...they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.”  
(Amos 1:11-12)**

Amos gives us a shocking picture of a society increasingly alienated from God – and the judgment that is going to come upon them because God cares so passionately about his creation that he holds us accountable for all the ways we distort and misuse the power he's entrusted to us - he wants something better for us: “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?”

In our society, we don't even wait for the Sabbath to be over any more... the market carries on regardless. And yet we're told here that our current ecological crisis is nothing compared to our **spiritual** crisis: and of course the two are deeply related. Even worse than the hunger and thirst of **physical** famine and drought (which can be absolutely terrible) is the famine of “hearing the words of the Lord”: the famine of **wisdom, guidance, meaning and hope**. I find it almost too shocking to imagine: a world without the word of God, but perhaps that's what it's already like for a lot of people. Perhaps that's what we need to be able to imagine.

In a less extreme way, perhaps that's what Luke's account of Jesus' visit with Martha and Mary helps us to do: Martha who's busy and distracted with all sorts of things (including the unfairness of her being left to do all the work), whilst Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him.

But first, both Amos and the Psalm give us a picture of a world not so far from our own: with so many different powers and dynamics that they often they seem to be beyond our control – whether it's the market, and the global economic crisis; or the environmental one, with its global

warming; the earth quaking; volcanoes erupting; and oil spilling relentlessly into the Gulf of Mexico...

One of the main ways people try to make sense out of something that seems to make so little sense is to attribute it to some arbitrary randomness, where things are put down to fate or superstition. A phrase I hear again and again (and increasingly, I think) with people I meet in my work is 'Well, it must have been meant to be...'; 'If that's our fate we can't do anything about it...' Or "These things happen for a reason...." Usually accompanied by a deep sense of passivity and futility.

But God's word gives us another way:

Today's readings are also about a radical facing up to the evil, deceit and injustice in the world: the 'gone-wrongness' of creation.

In Colossians, the emphasis is on both the 'once for all' of salvation but also on the way it is **still** being worked out: on '**completing what is lacking** in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body...'

What has happened in Jesus Christ is in line with the deepest truth of creation, but has also taken responsibility for all that's gone wrong since:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the first born 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**...for **in him** the **fullness** of God was pleased to dwell, and **through him** God was pleased to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross." (Colossians 1: 15-20)

Pretty dense stuff, isn't it?

Nothing is beyond or external to God: **all things** are subject to him: they do not have intrinsic power apart from God – no matter how alien or resistant or hostile they are: "in him **all things hold together**... through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself **all things**...by making peace through the blood of his cross." One day **all creation** will be reoriented towards God through the power of the resurrection, but we need to take our part in the ongoing outworking and fulfilment of it.

What defines Jesus is his ‘making peace through blood of the cross’: the reconciling power of his death and resurrection. And that’s what we’re called to identify with as we trust in the deep meaning of the word of God – however mysterious and paradoxical it might seem to be.

As Jesus says to Martha in her distraction and complaint:

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things: but there is need only of **one** thing.” The Greek that’s translated here as ‘one thing’ is henos: it can mean a ‘thing,’ but it is also the word used for a ‘person’ (in either the neutral or masculine form): and if we read it like that, it could be that Jesus is saying to her ‘there’s need of only **one person**, Martha’: i.e. **me!** And what’s so often translated as ‘the **better** part’ (which Jesus says Mary has chosen) is the word for ‘**good**’ – there’s no comparison or ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ about it. Choosing Jesus is simply the **good** thing: choosing to sit at his feet and listen to his word: wherever it leads us. We need our distraction and busy self-preoccupation to be interrupted by the Sabbath.

The deeper we go into God, the deeper we are led into the world and the ongoing outworking and fulfilment of the resurrection, deeper into the dynamic of hope and the reconciling power of the cross – but deeper into all that resists it, too, deeper into all the dynamics of the world gone powerfully wrong.

The Psalmist says: “I trust in the steadfast love of God”: I hope in the mercy of God’s love now and for ever.... “I will **proclaim your name**, for it is good.” (Ps 52:8-9)

Again, the Greek for ‘proclaim’ has a slightly different meaning, it is hupomeno: ‘to wait on’: ‘I will **wait on** your name’, staying in a position of trust and openness to receiving whatever you give me.

In her ‘Waiting on God’, the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil writes about the importance of our being willing to wait **under affliction**, not trying to deny or avoid it by escaping into fantasy - or concepts of self and reality that try to pretend that solving the problems of the world can be done an easier way- but persevering and facing up to the reality of its awfulness, whilst somehow still daring to trust God and whatever he will bring about through it.

I'm sure I'm not the only one here who meets people in states of distress and despair (and I recognise it in myself too) who say "I need to get out of this mess/ misery...." Rather than "I need help because I can't see a way **through**." But we can only do it if we believe that the reality of suffering and evil is **not** the last word, and we can only **know** it's not the last word by facing and staying with it: going through it, rather than trying to escape it. Just like Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem and the cross.

People often think I'm pretty weird in working with people who are critically ill and dying, staying with them in what sometimes seem to be unbearable places on the brink of life and death; trying to hold hope and yet never offering false hope. All I can say is that there's a deep reality about being with others in those places, where you know something is 'happening' – because that's where the power of Christ's resurrection is – it's something about life in its fullness that is one of those strange privileges you can't really begin to describe. I wonder where it is that Christ is most powerfully present for you?

For Paul, it's about prison and yet he is able to talk about rejoicing in his sufferings for the sake of those whom he loves:

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...

It always makes me a bit nervous when I hear someone talk like that. Some suspicious part of me wonders if there might be something rather masochistic going on, but Weil would say that you must never **want** suffering: that **would** be perverse (and our motives can be). Indeed it would be **impossible** for anyone who knows the 'inside' of the sort of suffering she's talking about (**extreme** affliction: 'malheur': a sort of physical and mental anguish that scourges the very soul.). What we **do** want to do is to **want Christ**.

But to be **led** into affliction is another thing, and if that's where we are led, we are also given the strength and grace to endure and persevere in it.

For some reason what's left out of today's passage from Colossians is the final verse (v. 29) ... "I toil and struggle ....**with all the energy that he**

**powerfully inspires within me...**" writes Paul, literally 'his (God's) energising me in power.'" This is what **Christian** power is, labouring and agonising but in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Earlier this week I was talking to someone who'd just finished reading a book of some of Mother Teresa's letters to her spiritual guides. It described how Mother Theresa had come to discover her 'vocation within a vocation' and how all she did in developing her work with the destitute and dying was in response to identifying with Christ on the cross and his "**I thirst**"....

And it certainly wasn't about anything she herself was to get out of it. The letters reveal just what a 'dark night of the soul' she experienced. For the last 50 years of her life she experienced nothing but the absence of God. She writes: "Where is my faith? Even deep down ... there is nothing but emptiness and darkness ... When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul ... How painful is this unknown pain..."

But her faith that God was somehow working through her remained. Indeed, perhaps in her emptiness there was space for more of God's Spirit to work through her. She writes of how the only thing that kept her going was feeding on the Word and bread of God every single day.... (the 'good thing' Jesus encourages Martha to choose – himself; his word of life – the bread from heaven) and whilst she agonised and pined for her lost sense of intimacy with God, she never questioned his existence and she remained faithful to his Word in her: she waited under affliction (and with what radiance in her face and smile; even if she was oblivious of it - like Moses after his meetings with the Lord).

I remember one of the posters on the wall of my office at Kneesworth House (a secure forensic psychiatric hospital), a place where I had never before come up against such darkness and despair. It was a photo of a huge expanse of sea, with Mother Theresa's words printed at the bottom saying: 'Don't say 'It's only a drop'... the whole ocean is made up of drops..."

Perhaps Jesus' cry "I thirst" is not so far from 'a famine of hearing the words of the Lord'...

It makes me wonder what it would mean for us to identify more fully with the famine of the Word in Cambridge? How can we make it accessible? And take seriously all those who live without

its wisdom, guidance, meaning and hope? That's what the TV series 'The Monastery' did, wasn't it? And there's another one in the making called 'The Big Silence' – hoping to introduce a few lucky individuals to the relevance and life of God's word through Ignatian Prayer: "The mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations." (Colossians 1:26) What an amazing thing that it has been made known to us! And it's up to us to **share** it! That's the dynamic of Christ's reconciling power in us. I wonder what we might be called into if we were open to receive it?

So as we prepare to enter this Eucharist, let us receive afresh the power of the Word made flesh, who's poured out his life and Spirit for us and let us offer ourselves to him and all that he wants to work in and through us.  
Amen.

(DPF 18.7.10)