

September 25th 2022:
Amos chapter 6: verses 1a, 4-7
I Timothy chapter 6 verses 6-19
Luke chapter 16: verses 19 onwards

The nation has a new chapter to add to its story: following the events of the last fortnight.

And many of us have gained individual memories to add to our own stories. One young mum in the crowd waiting for the Queen's funeral procession on Monday had brought along her 3 month old baby. She said that although he wouldn't remember anything about it, she would be able to tell him he'd been part of the nation's story.

Certain events, and the way we respond to them, and certain people, are significant in the story of our lives – they mould us into the people we are.

Each of our Bible readings today is in a different way linked to stories and significance.

In the first reading, Amos, the prophet from the 8th Century BC, was warning God's people that they were in danger of complacency in the face of impending disaster – the people who were supposed to show the nations of the world what it meant to be in relationship with the living God, and to create, as a result, a society of fairness and goodness, were instead astray, from God and from the behaviour expected of them. Amos in an earlier passage had said "let *justice* roll on like a river, *righteousness* like a never ending stream" (ch 5:24).

They were not heeding the warning that God's provision and protection could be withdrawn, so that they would be at the mercy of invading superpowers. Their story was about to crash (in the defeat of the nation and being taken forcibly into Exile). If only they had rethought their priorities, and recognised the influences which were drawing them away from God. Ironically, the first martyr, Stephen, quoted Amos in the sermon he made just before he was killed (Acts 7) but his words were ignored, as Amos' had been.

In the Gospel, Jesus re-tells a familiar story – one in which the fortunes of this life are reversed in the next. But He makes a dramatic change to the way this sort of story would end – usually, permission would be given for the person who has learnt, through bitter experience, to rethink what's important in life, so they can warn others who are also putting their trust in the wrong things. Here, Jesus gives the unexpected warning that people have already had prophets like Amos speaking clearly of the need to act as God wants, and throws in the prophecy that they won't even change when He defeats death and returns through the resurrection. The theologian Tom Wright describes the last sentence of this parable as a great crashing chord on an organ: several notes brought in all at the same time – different strands of ideas: in this case, the hope of the restoration and renewal of Israel, the poor and outcast being welcomed by Jesus, and, in Jesus Himself: the law and

prophets coming true in a new way, as Jesus rises again, opening a new age where all wrongs are put right.

Amos hit hard, in his words; Jesus hits hard, in His parable, and, for that matter, in His teaching. Do you remember Mark 8:36: where He said, “What profit is it, if you gain the whole world, but lose your own soul?” and in Matthew 6:21 when He says “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”?

You see, it seems to me that God doesn’t want us to mess about with our faith: that we have to get our priorities right.

So I wonder, and I’m preaching to myself as well, this morning, is there anything which is more important to us, in the story of our lives, than God?

In both these New Testament readings, the spotlight is on the love of money getting in the way.

Now, George Bernard Shaw took that quote from I Timothy and re-worked it. He said yes, people might be pushed to their moral limits in pursuit of money, but they would be driven past those limits to heinous and desperate acts because of fear of lack of money. He said “The lack of money is the root of all evil, not the love of it” And that might be something, with our concerns for the rising cost of living, that many would echo. But that’s not what the full passage in I Timothy says: a clear distinction is made there between how we think about what we need, and what might lead us away from God.

Loving money might mean being tempted to gain it sinfully, or to make it our first object in life, or to stop us responding to the needs of others. Someone has said that the only difference between a pane of glass through which we can see others, and a mirror, in which we can only see ourselves, is the silver which is coated on it.

I find one description of wealth in the letter to Timothy very interesting: it says don’t put your trust in the *uncertainty* of wealth. For a lot of us the temptation is not to seek endless amounts of money, but to use money to make ourselves feel secure.

But the point is being made that actually money can’t be the source of our security – that’s certainly true today: who would have thought that even those who were previously comfortable would be talking about having to choose between eating or heating? .

The letter to Timothy talks about “godliness combined with contentment being of great gain”

So what makes you content?

A man once had a vivid dream that if he could find a specific location on a river, he would find riches beyond his wildest imaginings. The dream was so real that he took to spending every spare hour walking up and down rivers, in search of that spot. And then one day, there it was. There was a woman camped there. She watched him as he very carefully scoured the area, and eventually she asked what he was looking for.

When he told her the dream, she said “I think I have what you are looking for: I found this in the water, and I am pretty sure it’s an uncut diamond. You’d better have it”. The man danced away, full of joy, and thinking about all the things he could buy when he sold the stone.

But the next day he was back. To his relief the camper was still there. “Are you ok?” she asked, “was I wrong? Wasn’t the stone valuable?” The man said, “No, it is a diamond and it’s priceless, but I need to know how it is that you could give it up so easily. “

The letter gives a list of how to obtain contentment: pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, take hold of eternal life..... Be rich in good works, be generous and ready to share.

Before Jesus gave this tough uncompromising parable, He told the stories of the lost coin, the lost son (that’s the prodigal) and the lost sheep, illustrating how much God longs for humanity to return, and the welcome that awaits us. Henri Nouwen in his book “Life of the Beloved” says if we take the concept of being *beloved* of God deep into ourselves, then that knowledge changes us. The Lord does challenge us to be whole-hearted in our allegiance, but we can be certain that the One who asks us to give up things which we have let slide into the position where God should be, sees us as “the Beloved” and wants the very best for us.

So this week, why not spend some time before God, asking what influences are creating your story; and deciding what you need to give up; or what you need to take up?

And you might also like to ask what influence you provide to others..

At the end of our lives, whether they be long or short (and you’ll know who I am quoting there), what will people say was of prime importance in your story, and what influences for good will you leave behind?