

Ready to meet Jesus
Matthew 25:1-13, Amos 5:18-24
8 November 2020 online

Father, may we hear your call to us, and by your grace obey you.
Amen.

I wonder if any of you have seen the memorial to Martin Luther King in Yerba Buena in San Francisco. I'm hoping you might be able to see a couple of pictures of it. It's a high wall-like structure with water cascading over the top into a pool below. Why should that be created as a memorial to Martin Luther King? Because he took as one of his guiding Bible texts the verse we have in Amos this morning: Let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream.

Some verses in the Old Testament you just can't imagine coming out of the mouth of Jesus. But my goodness, this verse sounds just like Jesus! In fact I am sure that it was verses like this one that shaped Jesus' thinking and his understanding of the will of God.

We look to Jesus for words of comfort, especially when times are hard. And those words *are* there for us. But we have to remember that the Gospels also contain some really challenging passages. And both our readings today appear to carry a warning.

Amos the prophet paints a wonderful picture of God our Father nearly tearing his hair out in exasperation and dismay.

I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.

But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

What? Is this God having a strop? Doesn't God like our worship, and our offerings? What's wrong with them? Well, nothing is wrong with them in themselves, of course. We are called to worship, to make a merry noise unto our God, to offer him our sacrifice of praise. But God wants them to be *real*. He wants them to come from hearts that have been surrendered to him, to arise out of lives that are being transformed into his likeness by the free flowing of his Holy Spirit in and through us, lives that reveal his love, his power, his kingdom.

And that means lives that reflect his values, his hopes for humankind. And that in turn means justice and righteousness. It's good to note that the justice comes first. It is more than just a matter of keeping our noses clean, obeying the rules, keeping out of trouble. The call to us as Christians, as followers of Jesus, is to strive for justice: to try to embody it in our own lives and to try to make it happen for other people.

It means making ourselves aware of the injustices in the world around us and being prepared to do something about them. It wasn't enough for the Jews to have prophets preaching to them about it, while they just carried on with their own little lives. God wanted the whole people to amend their lives. Amos sees clearly what is going wrong and he fulminates against the people, warning that they are on the road to catastrophe, because they are only paying lip-service to God and not doing as he commands. You might like to read the rest of Amos. It is fierce stuff. And the prophet can see that they will suffer for it in the long run, if they do not mend their ways. Amos can see the disaster that lies ahead, but he also knows the love of God, and sees that there is still hope for those who put their trust in him.

Our Gospel reading carries a similar warning. We need to understand that the picture described here of the wedding feast is typical of Middle Eastern weddings, and somewhat different from the ones we might be used to.

There may be torchlight processions, well into the night, with the bridegroom calling in at various places on his way to join his bride, with delays always possible, and no-one knowing exactly when he's going to arrive for the banquet and be greeted by the bridesmaids. It's all great fun and highly unpredictable! It would be a total nightmare for one of our modern wedding organisers!

So the bridesmaids know that he is coming, but have no idea when. We know that one day we shall see Jesus face to face, whether that is at the end of time or at our own death, or whenever – we do not know when. But Jesus is telling us here that we must be ready, we must be prepared so that we can greet him with a glad heart; we must be preparing ourselves and making sure our lives are ready, that we are ready to stand in his presence.

So being ready is one point. Another point is that some things just cannot be borrowed. As William Barclay points out: The foolish young women found it impossible to borrow oil when they discovered they needed it. We cannot borrow a relationship with God; we must possess it for ourselves. We cannot borrow a character; we must be clothed with it. We cannot always be living on the spiritual capital which others have amassed. We have to build our own. We cannot rely on the joyful worship of others to sing our praises to God: we have to praise him ourselves, not just with our music and words, but with our lives.

The Israelites in the time of Amos had grown complacent and careless; with riches for some had come greed and an inability to see the suffering of those around them. There have been times in the history of the church when those at the top have enjoyed privilege and status and a comfort that was denied the ordinary people. Even today, we see Christians ignoring the plight of the needy, preferring rather to maintain their own comfort. This cannot be pleasing to God.

So how do we respond to this call for justice, to this challenge to get ourselves ready for the coming of the bridegroom? As disciples of

Christ, we cannot ignore his call. As the prophet Isaiah puts it: I the Lord have called you with a righteous purpose and taken you by the hand; I have formed you, and destined you to be a light for peoples, a lamp for nations, to open the eyes that are blind. That, my friends, is God's call to each one of us.

In our homegroup zoom meeting the other week we were thinking about God's justice and the year of Jubilee, and how Christians came together almost 20 years ago in the 'Drop the Debt' campaign; some of us from this church joined the march in Edinburgh. As a result, the international finance organisations were persuaded to write off the debts of a number of poor countries who were being crippled by repayment costs of loans they'd received. This release from debt gave them new heart, it gave them hope. It was a real act of justice, because many of them had been inveigled into taking out loans that the lenders knew could simply never be repaid.

So often the wealthy prey upon the poor. Some of you may remember my Fair Trade Fashion shows some 15-18 years ago. The research I did revealed a shocking state of affairs, which has improved slightly, but still has a long way to go. And I remember someone saying to me that it was all very well talking about Fair Trade with overseas countries, but what about a fair deal for dairy farmers in this country? As though the same principle didn't apply! Of course trade should be fair. All trade. As Martin Luther King put it himself: Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. I am sometimes dismayed that Christians are not as committed to Fair Trade and buying Fair trade goods as we might be. Yes, they won't be the absolutely cheapest, but they are certainly not the most expensive either. And why would we not want to help our struggling brothers and sisters in this way?

Why is it that the heaviest burdens always seem to land on the backs of those least able to carry them? Why is it that in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, volunteers are having to feed children to make sure they get one decent meal a day?

What has gone wrong? We can continue to apply the sticking plasters, or we can try to understand the root causes and do something about them.

Why was an oil pipeline in Dakota deliberately rerouted to avoid the predominantly white town of Bismarck in North Dakota, and made instead to cross the Standing Rock lands of the Sioux people, including sacred sites, and posing grave risks to water supplies for indigenous communities?

Why are the people who live in the Amazon rainforest being terrorised and driven out of their homes to make way for large plantations of soya from which they will gain no benefit whatsoever?

Why are we complacent about climate change, when we see Bangladesh, which has contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions, suffering so gravely from ever worsening floods?

Why do we continue to buy Nescafe and other Nestle products when the California State Water Resources Control Board declared that Nestlé has no right to the 62 million gallons of water a year it's been pulling out of the aquifer -- but Nestlé has kept pumping anyway.

The list is endless. And there are no easy answers. There never have been. But as followers of Jesus I am convinced that we are called to ask the right questions, rather than just leave it to others, or just complain and do nothing. God's kingdom won't just come all on its own. Maybe that's why it's taking so long! God is waiting for us to work together to make it happen, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.