

Pentecost 26 9 November 2008 Jenny Dawson

Amos 5:18-24 1 Thessalonians 4:9-18 Matthew 25:1-13

“Keep watch, be awake, know God”

At 9:30 I invite people to be aware of this moment right now – seeing, smelling, touching, tasting, hearing.
Share that with a neighbour...

I find that difficult to do because we spend most of our time thinking about what we are going to do next or what we have just done. We are even distracted in this way when we think we are listening to someone else. It's so hard to listen, to give attention, and to be here, now, completely. Of course, it's only human to think about what might happen in the future. It's good to think about where God might want us.

For example, I am convinced there are some among you here whom God is calling to be priest or deacon. (*8am*) When I was Ministry Educator in Christchurch Diocese, helping people identify their call was part of my job. Each year I ran two Ministry Exploration Days where a group would reflect on God in their lives and how God speaks to people today. Most of them already had an idea that God was calling them to priesthood – probably influenced by the fact that priests are the people in fulltime Christian service are seen most. Part of my task that day was to offer other options, including seeing the committed daily life of a lay person as “fulltime Christian service”. For those who were seeking something with a clear “Christian label” we always had a presentation from a panel of people like chaplains, missionaries, deacons, and I added a sister from the Community of the Sacred Name. That's an Anglican order of nuns, with a mother house in Christchurch, so it was easy to have one of them along, dressed in very traditional black and white habit, to talk about their life of contemplative prayer. I wanted our participants to consider the “religious” life, that is the brothers and nuns of the various Anglican orders which could have included the Franciscans but they were up in Hamilton.

Some of you have heard me talk about the Cistercian monks at Kopua near Dannevirke. They are a Benedictine type religious order whose day is made up of prayer and work and lots of silence. Most people know about the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience – which is probably what put off most of those at the Ministry Exploration Day. However another part of their vow is stability: to stay in the same monastery all their lives. Some people would be attracted by that, especially in this world of change, but most of us would probably find their daily lives very difficult – chanting the same psalms and prayers every week, standing in the same stall in the church, and wearing the habit that they eventually wear for their burial. Yet it's a way of life that's rich. Whenever I am with them, I am powerfully reminded of what it means to be in this place, this moment, right now. That's all there is.

There is a story about a visitor asking a monk somewhere: “What do you do all day in the monastery?” and the monk replying “Well we fall and we get up, and we fall and we get up, and we fall and we get up.” Simply doing that requires an attentiveness and awareness that doesn't happen when we are constantly distracted by the future or the past. It is healing and hopeful for us all to learn to be simply here now.

“Therefore, keep watch”.....and you might truly understand what is happening now.

Right now, this week, we have seen people’s lives changed, not only because of elections, here in New Zealand, or in the United States, but also because of the Melbourne Cup – apparently a record amount of money was spent on bets. This week millions of people stood in polling booths or TABs or watching television hoping that the future would be different if this time they won. We see something similar at Lotto booths on Saturday afternoons. The downturn in the economy has frightened many people. Their fear is more about what will, or might, be, not what has already happened. What can we do to protect ourselves – and our resources?

The prophet Amos had some stern words for those whose focus was on a future in which they assumed they would be protected simply because they were Jewish. “Why do you long for the Day of the Lord, when God will return and reign as King?” Amos reminded them that that Day would be good only for those who follow God’s way. The famous words of Amos 5:24 sum it up. They challenge us just as much as they did the people who listened to Amos in the eighth century before Christ. “But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” That’s what really matters. Being just and righteous involves treating all other people the way God treats us.

The parable in the gospel is about God’s relationship with people. It refers to cultural practices about weddings that are strange to us, how the groom went to get the bride to bring her to his family’s home where she would live with him for the rest of her life and how the teenage sisters and cousins would be waiting for his return. They needed to be ready to participate in the celebration when the marriage was consummated. That’s not how we do it today. Nor does it make much sense to us today to have God likened to a patron or a god-father. Yet that is the image of God that lies behind this and many other gospel parables. A patron would treat selected people as if they were family members, with all the privileges of that position. Those in the Middle East today still think themselves very fortunate when someone chooses to be their patron. To please the patron, and to keep the patronage relationship going, they must be very clever, very sensitive to the patron’s whims, fancies and wishes. A wise person would give the patron all their attention and focus so they knew exactly what would please the patron at any point in time. A stupid person would risk losing their privileged position by not being sensitive to the patron. “So keep awake for you know neither the day or the hour.”

Today’s gospel reading comes half way through two long chapters of Jesus responding to the disciples’ question: “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” The paradox is that we can only cope with the future when we are really attentive to now. When the chips are down, when the dividends are paid out, we find that we can only really trust the God whom we spend time getting to know in this moment, in this place, right now. To trust God, we need to know God. “Therefore, keep watch”. Knowing God comes from living as if we are part of God’s family – a family that lives by justice and righteousness. That means noticing what we need to do to make things just and right, in each moment, each hour, each week. Paul wrote to the Christians at Thessalonika: “We urge you to love each other more and more, to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands.....and encourage one another.”

Hold that in your hearts and minds together with the words from Amos and we begin to discover what's really important in these days: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." That will require learning to be deeply attentive to the God whom we want to know and serve and love. God meets us in this moment now.