

Ora et Labora

Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 17 July 2022

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Genesis 18: 1-10a; Psalm 15; Colossians 1: 15-29; Luke 10: 38-42

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

If you've ever stayed in a monastery or a convent, you'll know that it's not all prayer, all God business, all of the time. Yes, there is an awful lot of prayer, with sung offices in chapel morning, noon, and night, with a daily Eucharist, and with a lot of silence in between. But you'll see how much work gets done, too—hours and hours every day. There's kitchen work, grounds work, farm work; there's cleaning and washing, looking after guests, doing the grocery shopping and collecting the mail, taking the monastery cats to the vet for their shots, doing the accounts, and fixing the tractor; then typically they have to earn a living, so they might make cheese or honey or wine, run a commercial printery, make incense for the likes of Father Martin to buy, bake artisanal bread or brew craft beer. In fact, the simple motto of Benedictine communities for 1,500 years has been *Ora et Labora*, prayer and work.

The Christian insight is that the sacred and the secular can't be kept separate, because of the incarnation. The things of God and the ordinary requirements of living in the real world are fused together forever in the person of Jesus Christ. Our God in heaven is at the same time a God for this world, a God *for* us and *with* us. This is an imaginative leap, especially in our day when most people are too busy and preoccupied to be bothered with prayer and regular worship, if they ever were. Yet at the same time commodified versions of the sacred are flourishing, offering escapism. Today's readings encourage us to keep together these dual aspects of the ordinary Christian life, which can too readily come adrift.

Martha and Mary of Bethany, in our Gospel this morning, sound a warning: with Mary the pray-er, and Martha the do-er; with Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, while Martha bustles about and grumbles in the kitchen. You can just see it, can't you? It's played out regularly in parish life, with Anglican women once divided between the Mothers' Union and the Ladies' Guild—the latter dismissing the former as the pray-ers, so the old story goes, while referring to themselves as the do-ers. The grumbling has been known to continue, too. If you read the novels of Barbara Pym, you might well conclude that Anglican church life is all about the practicalities of parish functions and social one-upmanship, with no discernible spiritual agenda whatever.

In other contexts, the spiritual work is reserved to the men, along with the priesthood, with women consigned to the domestic realm—a bit like Margaret Atwood's *Gilead*, with a female slave class called the Marthas.

But, friends, these two realms shouldn't be separated as if the secular world is empty of God—as if the simple regular habits of domestic life can't also be the habits of spiritual recollection; as if the discipline of daily prayer and Sunday Eucharist doesn't nurture the disciplines of transformed living. And all this because God's preferred form of self-revealing is through the human, chiefly the humanity of Jesus, and hence also in the relationships and tasks and challenges of ordinary living that sharpen up our sense of God over time. They know this in the monastery, and since the Reformation every Christian has been encouraged to discover this through lives lived beyond the cloister, out in the world, classically in

marriage and the forming of a Christian household, where children can be nurtured in life skills and in faith.

Notice in our Genesis reading today how God approaches Abraham to fulfil that great promise. In the midst of preparing a meal for the three guests, those mysterious divine emissaries, God's blessing of a dynasty to Abraham and Sarah is fulfilled. Perhaps we might conclude that welcoming others is always an opportunity for God to be welcomed, and who knows what might happen if we started seeing things that way?

In Psalm 15 this morning, we read that the one who dwells in God's presence is the one who lives differently with others. I don't think that this Psalm sets conditions for getting into God's good books. Instead, I think it's simply saying that the ones who live close to God—who dwell in his tabernacle and who ascend his holy hill—are the ones whose lives are guided by justice and compassion, and vice versa. The first and second commandments, about God and neighbour, are ranked together by Jesus after all: the man for God who was at the same time the man for others. And this is why today's secular world shouldn't be seen as emptied of God, even though God has no official location in it anymore. Instead, God can be imagined as woven right through it, with Jesus' embrace of this much-loved world continuing as Christians go about their lives, taking notice of what's around them, and seeking to make a difference.

In our Colossians reading today, we have a very high view of Jesus as Lord of the Church and Lord of the cosmos, as creator of earth and Lord of heaven—with a central role for the Church representing God's presence and God's claim in the world, and with a place for us together in Christ's ongoing life. There's a spiritual maturity here for us to grow into, a conversion of our worldliness and our preoccupations into a lively attentive expectation, learning to discern God in the ordinariness of life together.

Friends, this dual focus—of earth and heaven, of God and humanity, of ordinary things and divine things—is the Christian paradox that we mustn't resist. This historical human being, Jesus of Nazareth, is at the same time God with us. This historical, sociological phenomenon of the Christian Church is at the same time a heavenly society. And *our* gathering together around the words of scripture and the elements of bread and wine—which earth has given, and human hands have made—turns out to be the decisive place of divine encounter. Indeed, all the sacraments testify that when Christians get together with God, the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

This is how I read the secular. Not as the death of God but as God unplugged, God in the highways and byways, God seen out the corner of our eye as we do all those ordinary things we have to do in the world. God's special calling to life in the monastery finds its echo in our calling, too, as we set about making daily prayer and Sunday Eucharist the centrepiece of all the other things and activities that properly define us.

The Lord be with you ...