

*What are we to make of all this?*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2022—18 September 2022

Revd Martin Johnson

*Amos 8.4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2.1-10; Luke 16.1-13*

Many years ago, before I was ordained, I was involved in the planning of an ecumenical Eucharist in a tiny country community. The Uniting Church were also present in the township and so I organised the service with the local UCA parish to ensure there was an Easter service. We were of one mind generally about the conduct of the service, the only stumbling block concerned the readings; it is not our tradition, said the UC minister, to stand for the gospel. This wasn't a problem for me, but we did chat about this, she said that by standing for the gospel were creating a differentiation between the gospel and other parts of the scripture, she called it a Canon within the Canon. This intrigued me, I had been taught that the Gospel was the key by which the scriptures are opened or the lens through which they are viewed. We stand to welcome the Good News, we stand as Christ is present among us in the gospel proclaimed.

As many of you know as a child and adolescent I was nurtured and encouraged in a parish that enjoyed a tradition of liturgical excellence. This tradition further enabled me to grow as a young adult and led me to ordination. I am not however uncritical of that tradition, there are times when I look back and recall occasions and events which now cause me to smile! I do remember an occasion when I was sub-Deacon; one of my roles was to sing the epistle. The reading was from the end of second letter of Paul to Timothy, it sounded like this:

*(Chants) When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds. You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.*

I couldn't help wonder what St Paul might think of this. There I was dressed in the most gorgeous vestments, in a sumptuously decorated church signing something that he, or one of his followers, had perhaps scratched out on the back of a beer mat! And then to sing boldly:

*This is the word of the Lord!*

What makes this strange too is that Paul has just been writing about his imminent departure. The passage that I sang began with that well known purple passage, his last words almost... 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith, from now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness.' Oh yes, and don't forget my coat and my books.

When you think about Paul's extraordinarily daring theology of Romans and Galatians, about his ending of any differentiation based on gender, status or ethnicity it seems strange that he is concerning himself today with clothing labels. Should we universalise this message and give it serious authority or was Paul writing about a very particular set of circumstances? Should we simply ignore the prohibition on hair braiding, designer clothes and pearls? And to make matters worse our gospel reading this morning offers us some serious problems in the area of business ethics, should we ignore that? What are we to make of all this?

These are rather extreme examples yes! But they reveal to us the importance of reading our scriptures fully and carefully. This is so important. Many of the issues that we face in the Church today concern how we deal with and read the scriptures; sometimes I think the Church is more interested in Paul's coat . . . is that really what matters! So how we might we hear and respond to these scriptures today?

When it comes to the Bible we can talk about the distance of time and language and culture and there is validity in this, these things are important—we call this Historical Critical Technique. We can look at the genre of the piece of scripture and its context these are equally important—Literary Criticism. But we can use these things to minimise the impact of scripture or ignore it altogether. I think that the very nature of our scriptures mean that we can carefully determine what we might call the primary message; we seek a broad narrative approach not ignoring the secondary, the 'oh yes and don't forget my coat and book,' the pragmatic bits perhaps, but looking for the primary nested within them.

In today's letter to Timothy, given what we know of Paul's primary message, of unity and equality, was he not was trying to create some unity in a diverse congregation which contained both the very rich and the very poor? Kings and slaves. Was he simply saying to the wealthy ladies of the town: be mindful of the impact your appearance can have? Was he saying to the men, be quiet and pray reverently. Remember we are dealing with a community in which this mixing of gender and status is radically new.

In the gospel today this is Jesus at his ironical best. If you want to cook the book to gain friends go ahead. Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. For me, this is not an eternal home that I would like to be a part of. It is not *the* Kingdom, because the mark of the Kingdom is a profound equality and unity, one that we can barely dream of, it cannot be bought with dodgy invoices! So we do stand for the Gospel, because the Gospel is the Good News, the Good News of the Kingdom, we look for this in our scriptures and we will find it, sometimes in places that perhaps we might not have thought.

Our reading from Amos this morning speaks very profoundly of the breaking down of the barriers that divide. As does the Psalm. "*He raises the lowly from the dust: and lifts the poor from out of the dungheap; He gives them a place among the princes: even among the princes of his people.*" I know this talk of royalty is tough for the Republicans amongst us! For some it is hard to pray for the Monarchy as Paul asks us to do today! But again Paul is seeking a unity that is radical, a unity even with the King. Yes we do pray for our Head of State insofar as he might lead a kingdom that is moving ever closer to the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus, a kingdom of radical, profound unity, equality and equity. This is the primary message, it is nothing less than the Good News of salvation itself. Amen.