

**Woodstock, 14.10.18**

**Readings: Amos 5: 6–7, 10–15; Hebrews 4: 12–16; Mark 10: 17–31**

All kinds of things struck me in the news this week. There are signs of more obvious abuse of state power. When it was the Russians attempting to bump off their dissidents we could be outraged because we've all been trained to regard them as our enemies. Now that a Saudi journalist gets bumped off it's trickier because they're supposed to be our allies and we need their oil and their money for our weapons sales and their cooperation in the Middle East.

There are signs of the power that comes with money. Perhaps we are being more cagey in criticising the Saudis because we need their money. Talk of raising the income tax threshold and the effects of introducing universal credit mean more money for people who have money and possibly less money for people who have less. Those who have the least to save are expected to get through weeks with nothing until they receive benefit in arrears. And the fact that large numbers of people on benefits are actually in work already suggests there is some exploitation going on.

And the news was also full of someone born into wealth and privilege getting married. I'm a long way from being a keen royalist so I try to avoid the fuss. Weddings are a cause for celebration whoever is getting married but most of us don't make it to the TV news just because of who our grandmother is.

And I struggle to muster any enthusiasm whatsoever about the frenzy of who is wearing what on these occasions. But one thing struck me in the news reports: that the bride's dress was designed to show the scar she bore from a childhood operation. And it seemed that people were responding to that detail. It was refreshing to see a hint of a real person behind a fairy tale. We could see her scars.

Amos is an interesting bloke. Here we have a farmer who feels the call from God to give up what he knows and risk taking up the life of a prophet. He wasn't one of the usual prophets who might have gone around with the ruling classes; instead, in a time of prosperity, he felt the urge to speak out against some of the injustices, the unfairness, which had clearly built up in a time when some had made themselves rich. This can't have been an easy move for him and it wouldn't have made him popular. He launches into a tirade against people who ignore justice and fairness, those who bear down on those who speak truth to power, the journalists and the whistleblowers. It sounds all too familiar.

It shouldn't be much of a surprise to see that Jesus's message is somewhat similar. Here we have the story of a rich stranger, a sincere young man rushing up to speak to Jesus. He's been trying his best to live a life according to the teachings of the Law but it feels as if something's just not quite right. So he asks what's needed for life.

Jesus replies with a version of the commandments which outlaws defrauding. The word for defrauding is apparently one which is used in the Hebrew scriptures in a sense of withholding the rights or the wages of someone you've hired. So Jesus effectively points out that the rich young man shouldn't exploit or cheat his employees.

The word used to point out that this man had many possessions could perhaps be translated into modern English as *property*. Here is someone who has amassed a lot of land for themselves, in a culture which in theory celebrated that the land belonged to nobody but God. And taking more land for himself meant taking land from other people, leaving them with no means of subsistence. All too familiar.

Whatever the truth of how the man got his wealth, Jesus doesn't just have a rant about it. An interesting detail is that he looks at the man and his heart warms to him; he loves him. Jesus seems to really see someone who is trying their best to live a godly life and Jesus challenges him in that spirit of love to let go of all the wealth which is holding him back and to follow him. If he really had gained all that wealth through defrauding others or exploiting them or cheating them of what they were due then perhaps Jesus is also challenging him to put right what he's done and denounce his past in some great act of justice, of fairness. Perhaps Jesus is saying *if you want to follow me you really have to put right what's gone before; you can't just leap on the bandwagon and expect everything to be okay*. Who knows whether later the man came to a decision to follow; his story is silent from that point.

The man slinks off and Jesus uses the opportunity to have a few words with the disciples about riches. First of all he tells them it's hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. And they are amazed. They probably saw riches as a blessing from God. Even those people who had given up so much to follow Jesus. It was such an ingrained thing in their society that they couldn't possibly see how you might not think prosperity was a gift from God. So Jesus pushes them even further and gives them this image of a camel going through the eye of a needle. And now they're more astonished than ever. You may have heard the interpretation that there was a narrow gateway in Jerusalem called the Eye of the Needle so that with a bit of a squeeze and the shedding of all the baggage, a camel might perhaps have been able to go through it. But there isn't apparently any evidence to support that idea.

Rather than Jesus saying that if you get rid of all these things which hold you back you might just be able to get in, he is really saying *it is a completely and utterly ridiculous and preposterous idea that anyone might be able to get in*. No wonder the disciples are flabbergasted and wonder how on earth anyone can be saved. Jesus is saying some really difficult and challenging things here, and I think we have just as much right as those first disciples to be amazed and astonished and flabbergasted. Then Jesus gives the word of comfort. This might seem a completely and utterly ridiculous and preposterous idea, and indeed it is a completely and utterly ridiculous and preposterous idea; but with God's action it is possible. We can't possibly do it on our own; it is God who lets us in.

Jesus looks at the man and loves him. However hard we try, we're going to mess up from time to time, in small ways and in big ways. *Why do you call me good?*, says Jesus. *Only God is good*. We are all, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it, naked before God. And, as we approach God in prayer and look at God, so God looks at us and loves us. It doesn't take away the challenge, or the uncovering of what is wrong. None of us is entirely good in the way God is. But God sees all that and loves us. Before God no creature is hidden. We are all there, naked and vulnerable, bringing whatever guilt or shame we carry, and God looks at us and loves us.

A little detail from the Hebrews reading: before God no *creature* is hidden but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. We may have a particular relationship with God as humans but there is no creature which is hidden. This is God's whole creation and we are like priests to that creation. In Jesus we see that God lives in humanity. We see ourselves as the Body of Christ, living God's life in the world, living God's life in creation. We are like priests to creation, linking God and the world. What does that have to say about this week's news of yet more concern over climate change?

If that sounds like quite a burden then remember that we have a *high* priest in Jesus who is able to sympathise with our weaknesses. Humanity is limited and God knows that. God looks at us and loves us, willing us to take steps in the right direction.

For medieval mystics who had a vision of that high priest, Jesus, apparently the test of whether the vision was a true vision or a deception was to ask in the vision: *show me your scars*. Show me your scars. The risen Christ still bears the wounds of crucifixion. Show me your scars. Let me see you are really human. As we stand with creation so Jesus stands with us. Show me your scars. Let me see you are really human.

We come around the table to celebrate our communion with each other and with Christ. We remember the body broken and the blood shed. We see Christ's scars. And God sees ours. God looks at us and loves us. We say to Christ: *show us your scars*. And Christ says to us: *I know your scars; now follow me*.

Following is not always easy. In the world out there the powerless get oppressed. Dissidents get bumped off. Today the Roman Catholic church is acknowledging Oscar Romero as a saint: a man who was sent as a conservative bishop to calm things down but ended up a hero of the liberation movement, gunned down during a service of worship. The scars are not always real physical ones but sometimes they are. Scars of mistakes, inflicted by others or self-inflicted. We are human. We are limited. We are laid bare, vulnerable and weighed down by guilt and shame.

And God looks at us and loves us. The God who takes on our scars, who knows our scars, who loves our scars, says *you are loveable; you are loved; now, follow me*.