

Getting the balance right

17 July 2022

BIBLE READING

Amos 6:4-7, 7:7-17

You lie on beds adorned with ivory
and lounge on your couches.

You dine on choice lambs
and fattened calves.

You strum away on your harps like David
and improvise on musical instruments.

You drink wine by the bowlful
and use the finest lotions,
but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.

Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile;
your feasting and lounging will end. ...

This is what the Lord showed me: the Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb-line in his hand. And the Lord asked me, 'What do you see, Amos?'

'A plumb-line,' I replied.

Then the Lord said, 'Look, I am setting a plumb-line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.

'The high places of Isaac will be destroyed
and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined;
with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam.'

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: 'Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying:

'Jeroboam will die by the sword,
and Israel will surely go into exile,
away from their native land.'

Then Amaziah said to Amos, 'Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy any more at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.'

Amos answered Amaziah, 'I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the Lord took me

from tending the flock and said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.” Now then, hear the word of the Lord. You say,

“Do not prophesy against Israel,
and stop preaching against the descendants of Isaac.”

‘Therefore this is what the Lord says:

“Your wife will become a prostitute in the city,
and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword.

Your land will be measured and divided up,
and you yourself will die in a pagan country.

And Israel will surely go into exile,
away from their native land.”

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’

‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’

MESSAGE Getting the balance right

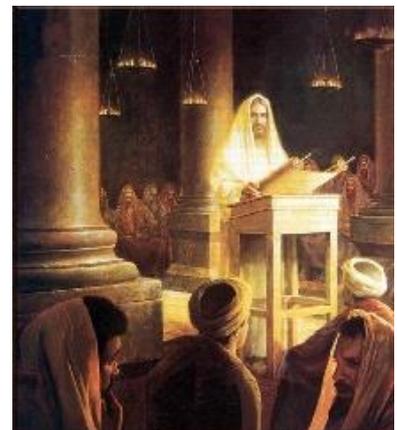
I wonder how you understand the person of Jesus ...
was he a defender of **traditions** or a subversive **radical**?

How could we tell?

What would Scripture suggest?

How about the role of the **church** in the world? Are we called to defend and live out so-called traditional Christian values or to be subversive and radical?

Again, what would Scripture and lived experience suggest?



In last week’s reading from Luke, a lawyer asks Jesus how he must live to inherit eternal life. The lawyer gives a very **traditional** response – love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength – which is taken from the *Shema*, the prayer prayed three times every day by devout Jews – and love your neighbour as

yourself. Jesus affirms the response: 'You have given the right answer. Do this and you will live'.

For those who see Jesus as **traditional** and **conservative**, here is good supporting evidence. There may be some quibbles around the definition of **who is my neighbour**, but Jesus appears to confirm traditional values while encouraging people to expand their view of who is a neighbour.

Likewise with the prophet **Amos**, the shepherd from Tekoa. His critique of the wealthy of his day is not so much that they spend their time eating, drinking and playing music – it's more that they are blind to the **injustice** of crushing the poor so that they can enjoy a lavish lifestyle.



Amos has a vision of the Lord holding a **plumb-line** – used in building to make sure that walls are built vertical and true ... So are the people following God's righteous and true ways as set out in the Law ... which includes loving their neighbour as themselves? Clearly the rich are **not** living this way because they are living in luxury while the poor go hungry.

Amos has a harsh message for the leaders of Israel. God sees how you are living – how you are ignoring the needs of the poor – and so will allow you to be attacked and sent into exile. It's a **traditional** prophetic message ... if you don't change your ways then there is only suffering and exile ahead.



But who would want to be a prophet ... bringing **uncomfortable truths** to people in power who don't want to listen? ... As we heard in today's reading, not only is Amos's message rejected, but there is direct intimidation and threats made against Amos himself. For prophets like Amos, pointing people back to God's traditional ways

was quite radical ... and also quite dangerous.

Meanwhile Jesus is on his way towards Jerusalem and enters a village where two sisters – Martha and Mary – live. It's quite likely that these sisters also have a brother named Lazarus – the one who got very sick and died – as reported in John's Gospel. It seems that Jesus knew this family well and enjoyed their hospitality on more than one occasion.



In Luke's story, Martha appears to run the house and she is the one who invites Jesus to stay for a meal. Her sister, Mary, is apparently younger and therefore has less influence but also fewer responsibilities.

Offering hospitality to guests was both an honour and an expectation in Eastern culture. In this social setting, the women were traditionally responsible for preparing and serving the meal while the men would sit and listen and learn from the teacher, Jesus. There's nothing unusual in how Luke presents the story – except that the two women are **named** and take centre stage in the story.

All is going well until Martha realises that Mary has skived off from her duties and is sitting – along with the men – listening to Jesus. Martha thinks it's an outrage and interrupts Jesus, demanding that he order Mary to return to her rightful place in the kitchen alongside Martha.



If Jesus is as traditional as we often make out – and if he supports traditional gender roles – then he will do just what Martha demands. Mary will be sent back to the kitchen to do her traditional female role.

But Jesus' response is **subversive** and **radical**. Martha, you're getting all hot under the collar for no good reason. You're worried and distracted by **many things** – perhaps you're trying to prepare a lavish banquet when all that's needed is a simple meal – but see Mary here ... she's chosen the **one thing** that's needed. She's respecting me in a different way by choosing to sit and listen to my teaching.



Mary has of course broken two longstanding social traditions. The first being that a woman's place revolves around hospitality and preparing food ... just as it still does in many Asian and African contexts. The second scandal is that Mary – a woman –

would dare take on a male role of being a **disciple** – sitting and listening to the teacher. Worse – from Martha’s perspective – is Jesus **encouraging** Mary’s choices and behaviours. So much for Jesus being a traditionalist!

Feminist scholars suggest that Jesus here is setting women free of traditional gender roles in both his rebuke of Martha and his encouragement of Mary.

But perhaps there’s more going on here than we realise.

First, the roles of Martha and Mary are more fluid than this episode might suggest. If John’s Gospel does indeed refer to the same Martha and Mary as Luke, then Martha was indeed considered a disciple of Jesus and was a deep theological thinker.

When her brother Lazarus dies, Martha confronts Jesus when he arrives at the village, claiming that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had only come sooner. But just ask, Jesus, and you can heal Lazarus. So Martha recognizes Jesus’ ability as a healer and his identity as the Messiah.



Jesus reassures Martha that Lazarus will rise again. Yes I know, says Martha, I know the **theology** that there will be a resurrection of all the dead on the last day. Jesus then shares that **he** is the resurrection and the life and that everyone who believes in him will live even though they die. Clearly Martha was a pretty deep thinker and could hold her own with Jesus.

Meanwhile, in John’s telling of the story, Mary seeks Jesus out and weeps openly. She then accompanies him to the tomb. She helps Jesus grasp the grief that surrounds every death. In this case she is mostly about **action** and following women’s roles around death.



So in John’s Gospel the roles of Martha and Mary are reversed – with Martha being the thoughtful disciple and Mary being a woman of action.

Is there, then, an appropriate role for women to take in the church? In the background somewhere, cooking or looking after children, quietly doing what is considered ‘women’s work’?

This has been the traditional view for most of church history.

Not according to these Gospel stories. Both Martha and Mary are presented as strong and forthright characters who challenge stereotypes and who are encouraged **by Jesus** to listen, to think and then to act as **disciples** – while also taking on what were regarded as women’s tasks. The subversive nature of Jesus is to **allow** and to **encourage** both Martha and Mary to pursue the radical role of a female disciple.



There’s another aspect to today’s story that’s worth mentioning as well. Luke has placed the incident with Martha and Mary between the parable of the Good Samaritan and Jesus’ teaching on prayer.

The parable explores what it means to love your neighbour as yourself. It’s focused on choices and **actions**, and being guided by compassion and need, as illustrated by the Samaritan who stopped to help. At the end of the episode, Jesus encourages the lawyer – and everyone who hears the parable – to **go and do likewise**. It’s a call to **loving action**.

The episode immediately after the Martha and Mary incident that we’ll look at next week is about **how to pray** and the character of God who answers prayer. It’s all about **reflection** and the **inner** life of discipleship and learning from the example and teaching of Jesus.

In between is today’s story of Martha and Mary that apparently favours listening and devotion over action. Yet the Good Samaritan parable clearly favours action over piety. So what is Luke really saying to us?

Rather than an **either/or** choice, it’s **both/and**.

Luke often shows Jesus at **prayer** and also at **worship**. It’s what energises and guides his ministry.

Luke also shows Jesus **in action**, travelling around, healing the sick and restoring people to community.

Both aspects matter and a healthy Christian life will involve **both** reflection and action, worship and mission, being and doing.

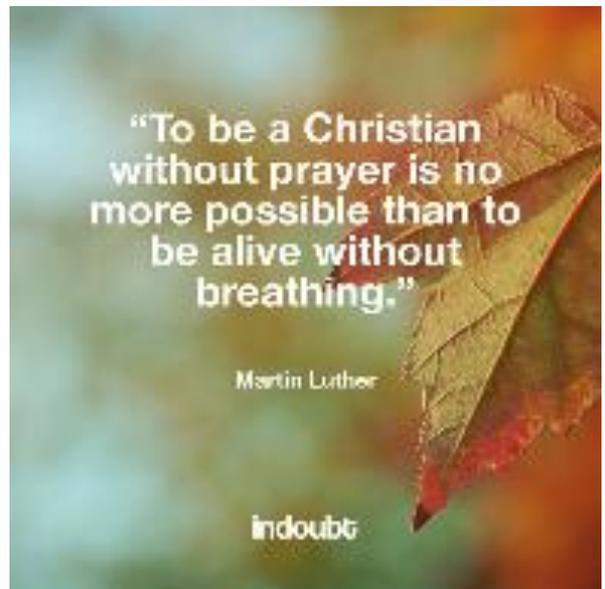
As we said earlier, it’s a bit like **breathing**. We breathe in and we breathe out. Breathe in and breathe out.

Try not breathing in for a few minutes ... we can hold our breath for a minute or so but then we need to breathe in.

Likewise, we can keep breathing in without breathing out and soon enough we will hyperventilate and keel over.

The Christian life is similar. We **breathe in** as we pause from our busyness and focus on God – whether through prayer, meditation, stillness or worship. We see different priorities. We are reminded of God’s ways.

But then we go out into the world and into our everyday lives. We **breathe out** as we interact with others, as we love and serve them, as we live out the way of Christ. We become God’s hands and feet – and mouth – in the world.



Coming back to the question I posed at the beginning, you will have to make up your own mind whether Jesus followed tradition or whether he was radical and subversive. I think he was both.

The more relevant question may be whether as God’s people we are called to follow tradition or to be radical. Again the answer may be both, but often we find it much more comfortable to follow tradition, since being radical puts us in the spotlight and may bring us unwanted attention or even rejection and threats. I don’t think Jesus was crucified for being too traditional.

In keeping with the story of Martha and Mary, we’re going to sing a song now that asks us to consider how God has used women right through history.

HYMN There is a line of women

There is a line of women
extending back to Eve,
whose role in shaping history
God only could conceive.
And though, through endless ages,
their witness was repressed,
God valued and encouraged them
through whom the world was blessed.

So sing a song of Sarah

to laughter she gave birth;
and sing a song of Tamar
who stood for women's worth;
and sing a song of Hannah
who bargained with her Lord;
and sing a song of Mary
who bore and bred God's Word.

There is a line of women
who stood by Jesus' side,
who housed him while he ministered
and held him when he died.
And though they claimed he'd risen
their news was deemed suspect
till Jesus stood among them,
his womanly elect.

So sing a song of Anna
who saw Christ's infant face;
and sing a song of Martha
who gave him food and space;
and sing of all the Marys
who heeded his requests,
and now at heaven's banquet
are Jesus' fondest guests.

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