



Discerning Hearts

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Year A, Ordinary 32

Amos 5: 18-24; Matthew 25: 1-13

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I received a salient reminder this week to be mindful and careful of the Old Testament texts we read on Sunday given they're located in the very territory being torn apart in Israel, Gaza, Palestine and Lebanon. This is not the week to read from the book of Joshua.

We need to be careful and mindful of what we say outwardly for every word has repercussions. To not speak, though, is to say quite a lot. To speak is fraught.

We can name the horrifying bloodshed, the inhumane acts of violence whose paths of destruction kill abundantly and indiscriminately. We can bear witness to a relentless onslaught and an absence of respite. This we can name. These acts we can name. But to venture anywhere near a reason for such things, to create such a narrow defile, that is fraught. It is complex and complicated and multi nuanced. For most of us it's not our physical landscape of belonging, so who are we to speak? Yet we share the territory of a common humanity so how dare we not? We see life and we see death and we can feel helpless before it.

What's more, in a place such as this, we're connected because the Hebraic texts we share are deeply embedded in these places torn apart by war. Threads of these stories are woven through us. The tendrils of impact wind inward so we

also need to be careful and mindful of what we receive and what we speak inwardly.

Today's imagery in Amos is striking. It inverts our usual expectations, we're not accustomed to hearing, "the day of the Lord is darkness, not light, gloom with no brightness in it." Strange to hear in the darkness of our world at the moment. Perhaps the last verse helps give them context, "but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Is the outworking of justice and righteousness as darkness and gloom to us?

While away on sabbatical I had a chance to read the book 'Lola in the Mirror' by Trent Dalton. Set in Brisbane, the main character and the narrator of the story is a young woman who's lived all her remembered life "on the lam" (on the run from the law) with her mother. Not homeless, she insists, rather 'not housed.' She makes sense of her world through sketching, characterising people, herself, the issues she faces and negotiates in image form. A constant refrain throughout the book is that you see the light in an image because of the darkness you draw. On a blank piece of paper the light is formed from the shadows you darken.

As we look around our world we see much darkness and shadow. How are we letting that darkness shape the light that is the life of the world? How are we letting it shape us, our being as light in the world? Does it take the shape of justice and righteousness?

To help pass the time while travelling by air I chose to watch the movie "Sweet As." Interestingly, it also was set in Australia, but this time Western Australia. It told of a small group of troubled teens who were taken from their various dysfunctional situations for a week in the outback north of Perth. They travelled by bus. At the outset each had to hand over their cell phone. Part way through the first day they stopped in the

middle of nowhere for refreshments. One of the two leaders gave them each a camera. Old school, with actual film that had to be wound on after each shot. Some explanation of what they actually were was required! The instruction they were given was that they each had 20 shots. They were not like a cell phone, there was no deleting, no endless shots that could be taken. The instructor told them, you only get 20 shots, use them wisely, look through the lens and decide what the story is you want the pictures to tell.

We're beleaguered by so many images, so much shadows our world. Inevitably such darkness shapes us. Our call to be people of light invites us to be discerning. To choose where and what and how we cast our gaze. For what we see, what we take into ourselves shapes us and the story of life we'll tell. If we choose only to look for darkness it will fill us.

There's a story attributed to the English bishop Steve Cottrell that tells of two woodchoppers, you may have heard it. The two are working in a forest. One works tirelessly all day, sweating through the heat of the day, not stopping for a break at all. The other stops every hour for about 10 minutes then begins again to chop wood. At the end of the day reckoning, the one who stopped every hour for 10 minutes had chopped a greater quantity of wood than the one who chopped without ceasing. "How is it possible?" exclaimed the one who'd worked without ceasing. The other responded, each time I stopped I not only rested but sharpened my axe.

This story came to mind as I read today's gospel. Five bridesmaids named as wise were those with oil to spare should the bridegrooms' arrival be delayed, whereas those who were foolish did not. The woodcutters' story speaks of taking time to sharpen tools and replenish energy for the task in hand. Foolish as it seemed, resting from endless toil, taking time to hone the tools for the task in hand made him more effective.

The task of the bridesmaid is to keep the lamp burning so there's light when the bridegroom appears - oil to spare is of benefit. How good are we at pausing to attend to our God-expecting lamps and to ensure we've oil to replenish them when needed? Taking a bit of time to pause from endless toil, from endless perusal of news feeds and media updates, might return us to ourselves, to who we're called to be and what is ours to do. In doing so we give ourselves a chance to check in, refill and replenish the oil in our lamp. And to be attentive, to listen and look for, seek and ask of God who we expect to meet and recognise when God comes to us, is with us.

We may feel called to respond to the life of the world, to be light, to work for justice and righteousness to flow down. But we're not responsible for the life of the whole world, it doesn't solely rest on our shoulders. It's important to be mindful and careful of how we speak and treat and act outwardly for we have impact and there is repercussion for we're deeply interconnected across our world. And we must extend such grace and generosity, mindful and careful compassion inwardly also. Repercussion and interconnection work both ways. For us to be people of light for the life of the world we need to be nurtured as well as nurture. For us to extend compassion we must have experienced extending compassion to ourselves also. Unless we open ourselves to receive so that we may give, how can we be part of that justice that rolls down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?