

Sermon preached by Professor John Vickerman on July 17, 2022, 5th Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Gen. 18 1-10a; Ps 15; Col 1. 15-28; Luke 10. 38-42

- What are your feelings as you look out on the world today?
- War in Ukraine, awful suffering, will it spill over?
- The continuing COVID epidemic that seems to be increasing again.
- A political mess in our own country, potential leaders fighting for their own ends, not the best for our country and world.
- The dreadful way we treat refugees, ship them out to Rwanda - human beings created in the image of God.
- Maybe personal worries about the cost of living or health.
- Climate change - a red heat alert tomorrow. Is this a foretaste, we are on a trajectory to most of our planet being uninhabitable for humans in 50 years and our leaders cannot see what they are doing. Using Putin's war as an excuse, our Government seems to be going back on its undertakings to stop coal mines, to approve oil and gas drilling in the seas around Shetland. Oil and gas companies around the world are set to exploit numerous fossil fuel deposits that will set off carbon bombs that will send much of our planet off to destruction.
- I know I frequently feel helpless, I can lobby my MP, but I might as well talk to a brick wall!
- I can try to live a life-style that is gentle to the earth, but if the big countries and corporations don't rapidly reduce their carbon output, will it make any difference!
- Wherein as Christians is our hope? Some say don't worry God will sort it out - at the second coming of Jesus, or that God has promised a new heaven and a new earth at the end of time! Just sit back and wait! In a sense eat drink and be merry, God will sort it out, but this cannot be correct.
- The story that we read of lunch at Martha and Mary's home is a wonderful vignette that might help us.
- We know from John's gospel, chapters 11 and 12 that Jesus had a very special relationship with this family - Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus. We are told Jesus loved them.
- What made Luke include this incident here? It probably occurred before the incidents described in John's gospel.
- At first sight it is a very domestic occasion that doesn't seem very profound. We can easily connect with the scenario and many will understand Martha's sentiments!
- Jesus here am I slaving over a hot stove getting your lunch and Mary just sits there chatting with you!
- Oh Martha, we understand your need to care for us, but sometimes to be quiet and present with one another is the deeper need and that is what Mary recognises.

- The urge to do something is strong in many of us. After all Jesus would not get his lunch if Martha wasn't active. And yet Jesus said that Mary had chosen the better part.
- Were they talking or were they just quiet together. We don't know! What we do know is that Mary was with someone whom she knew was very special.
- Luke's description is very prosaic, but if we look at the Colossians passage Jesus is described as the creator and sustainer of all things.
- This ordinary carpenter from Nazareth, for whom Martha is rushing about making lunch and who is quietly sitting with Mary is God himself. That is awesome as our American friends would say.
- To what extent Mary was aware how special Jesus was, we do not know. What was Jesus saying to her? Again we do not know, but we know that he valued the fact that she was listening. Something perhaps we could all benefit from learning.
- We don't know too much about the effects of Mary's listening, there are just isolated, though very significant actions that must be a consequence of her close knowledge of Jesus.
- When Lazarus fell very ill and died, she knew that if Jesus had been with them, he would not have died and Jesus shared her sadness, we are told he wept. And then he wonderfully brought Lazarus back to life. THAT must have reinforced her view that Jesus was rather special.
- However, it was after that incident the Jewish leaders were so incensed, they redoubled efforts to get rid of Jesus.
- In John's gospel chapter 12 is the story of her anointing Jesus with expensive ointment before the Passover, as if she was aware that something dreadful was about to befall Jesus that would result in his death.
- She did not hide but showed her love and faithfulness in very public way. What did she understand, possibly little, but she must have been fearful and yet she stayed faithful.
- Then as Jesus was crucified, she was at the foot of the cross along with Jesus' mother. She must have heard him cry out in desperation, 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me?' It must have seemed like utter disaster and yet they were faithful.
- It is instructive to remember that Jesus called on his disciples to follow him. He did not promise success, he did not promise joy. Some of his male followers expected political success, but there is no evidence the women did. These women just knew they had to be there - they were faithful.
- The next sighting of Mary is at the tomb, after such apparent disaster she had to go and tend to Jesus body! What devotion is that? A strange man meets her. She asks him, where have they laid his body, the answer comes back - Mary! She is the first to know that disaster and death is turned into resurrection! With what joy she rushed off to tell the other disciples. What a wonderful outcome of her faithful devotion.
- In the Colossians passage, Paul recounts how out of love for his world God in Christ came to live amongst us.

- Why did God want to live amongst us? As Paul says he is the creator of the Cosmos, our wonderful earth.
- He caused life to evolve over billions of years. A process that involved spectacular developments as simple cells evolved into vast varieties of plants, bugs, birds, animals and ultimately human beings.
- It is a process of great changes and transitions that involve suffering, death and new life. Wonderful outcomes but involving pain and death on the way. Human beings are fantastic in the complexity of body, brain and mind. They are capable of enormous ingenuity and goodness.
- A recent spectacular example this ingenuity is the James Webb telescope positioned a million miles from earth which is able to detect light generated 13.5 billion years ago at the start of the universe. The pictures coming out this last week are mind-blowing.
- And yet because humans are free beings, not only are they capable of great enterprises and of showing great self-giving love, they can also be horrendously stupid and evil, inflicting great suffering on the planet and other animals and humans.
- I believe God came in solidarity with all life to participate in the joy and suffering of the world he had created.
- In Jesus he demonstrated that he is with us. With us in the joys, with us in the suffering.
- With us in the joys and stresses of a wedding, with those who are despised - the woman taken in adultery, the tax collector, the Samaritan woman at the well. With the suffering - the leper, the father whose daughter was dying, the blind man.
- With us when evil seems to triumph and death is the consequence.
- Our story today illustrates this. Jesus was with Mary and Martha just enjoying lunch.
- It's a two-way process though, Jesus appreciated Mary being with him. We sometimes focus on God with us in our need, what if God needs us to be with him?
- Jesus invited people (reportedly predominately men!) to follow him, to be WITH him. Frequently just being with someone even without speaking is the most wonderfully supportive action you can take. Is that what Jesus was partly hoping from his disciples?
- I think this was Mary's relationship with Jesus, he was quietly with her and she with him. She was faithfully with Jesus all the way to the cross and beyond, so that at the tomb she wonderfully found that he was back with her.
- How does this all impact on us at this time?
- There are many aspects of our lives where Jesus calls us to be faithful out of love for him. Faithfulness means loving one another as he loves us. Loving those we find difficult, caring for those in need, the suffering, the refugee, the hungry, the homeless. Our society is full of folks who need that love.
- This week's extreme heat warnings demonstrate that the climate emergency is a very present danger and focusses on our role as God's children in seeking to change the direction of destruction that we humans are bringing to God's creation.

- Jesus called his disciples to follow him, be with him. He did not promise success, he did promise to be with them to the end of time. He showed that following him could mean apparent disaster, but death and destruction are not the end.
- I don't know how things will work out. The Red alert tomorrow could be the foretaste of worse to come.
- Indeed, many parts of our planet are suffering terribly already. I and some others have been reading *Words for a Dying World: Stories of Grief and Courage from the Global Church* Edited by Hannah Malcolm. A series of stories from different authors around the world about the impact of consumer driven exploitation on climate for many of the poorest and most vulnerable on our planet. It is profoundly moving and should be read by all to learn how so many are suffering and will suffer.
- While things do not look good our calling as God's children is to be faithful knowing that that God is with us. We work with God for a renewed heaven and earth, and that may require some sort of death and resurrection!
- As one of the authors in this book says, our challenge each day is, 'What does faithfulness look like for me today'?
- It may mean avoiding the use of plastic cling-film to wrap cheese in. It may mean planting a tree or digging a pond or letting your garden go wild, it may mean walking to the shops instead of using the car, it may mean doing a carbon footprint calculation for your-self and working out how to reduce it, it may mean changing to an electric car, it may mean sacrificing an overseas holiday, it may mean joining the Cathedral eco group, it may mean joining a demonstration against a new coal mine or some dreadful government policy.
- In the end the journey maybe very painful, but God walks with us. In a few moments we will remember that Jesus walked a path of great suffering all the way to death to demonstrate his solidarity with us, and his never-failing love for us. As we share communion this morning may we remember Mary's faithfulness and like her seek to walk faithfully with our God.
- Amen