

Sermon for Twenty-fourth after Trinity, 2023.

Amos 8.4-6&11,12 2 Corinthians 6.1-10 Psalm 119.65-72 Luke 12.13-21

The Collect: Lord God, who sees that we put not our trust in any thing that we do: mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Amos 8.11 'Behold, the days are coming when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.'

I was due a visitor on Saturday afternoon, so I thought I would make some Chelsea Buns to enjoy together. We don't take food for granted; we are thankful for it. And, bread, as you know, is not just for the stomach, it's a token of hospitality. When a dignitary arrives in some countries, an offering is made to them of bread and salt. The symbolism is of welcome and peace. A book I've just finished reading by Rory Stewart, former MP, Diplomat, Soldier and Historian, recounts his walking adventure across Afghanistan just after the Russians and the Communist regime had been temporarily supplanted by the US and a more varied, fragile government installed. Stewart walked, mostly alone, and latterly with a surly hound, between mountainous territories from village to village, West to East. He was cold and hungry, welcomed or shunned, fed lavishly from the meagre stores of poor people, or grudgingly by headmen who regarded him suspiciously. The dog had to depend on Rory for food, and, in a twist of cruel fate, died on a surfeit of sharp bones fed to him by well-meaning Westerners at the end of the journey. So, when Amos writes of famine on the land, he makes it clear that food and relationships are intimately interconnected. People depend on food. People depend on God.

Animals might appear to enjoy their food, but, as Pavlov's experiments with dogs demonstrated, audible triggers can switch their digestive juices on. Humans, exhibiting similar autonomic responses to other mammal's, differ in having potential to exert some control over appetite. Sadly, many of us could do better, as obesity and anorexia nervosa attest. In our part of the world, few of us have experienced unsolicited hunger; except perhaps whilst fasting, or preparing for surgery. Sadly, indeed worse than sadly, tragically, the days have arrived that there is a famine in the land: a dearth of spiritual nutrition. This reveals itself as an insatiable appetite for spiritual junk food. People depend on unhealthy appetites, not on God. Think for a moment of a glutton stuffing their mouth with burgers, donuts and cola. There is a programme on TV where a man goes round America filming his exploits as he gorges himself. If he finishes all that the restaurant sets before him, he doesn't have to pay! Contrast this with the agent of the Michelin Guide who checks for quality, for the chef's personal style etc, before awarding a star-rating for a restaurant.

So, the spiritual famine all around us is manifested as appetite without restraint; reflex without mindful control; self-regard without discernment; acquisitiveness without generosity. The result of this is personal and communal malnutrition. These attributes are the antithesis of our Lord's teachings in that they widen the gulf between the creature and the Creator. In short, there is a famine in our land; probably in most of Europe too. Interestingly, Amos says that people will run about during the famine, 'from sea to sea, and north to east; ...to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.' This seems to indicate either a dearth of the Lord's teaching on a global scale; or that God has become silent. St Paul tells the Corinthians that they need to work with the Apostles to find salvation. God's grace is available to them. He tells them that the cost to servants of God in their ministry of sharing God's grace, is to endure desperate hardships and punishment. Yet, genuine love, kindness and truthfulness of speech, even the power of God, will be eschewed and Christians treated as disreputable impostors.

What evidence have we that people are not hearing the word of God? Plenty! Starting within the Church, last week we saw the General Synod of the Church of England vote in accord with sexual pressure groups to disregard the plain text of Holy Scripture, and thus agreed to introduce prayers of blessing for use in same-sex services of affirmation. This not only flatly contradicts Jesus' injunction to live chastely outside male-female marriage, but breaks several canons and articles of the Church which bishops have vowed in their consecration to uphold. Outside the Church, Journalists and media reports have decided to publish lies, and some, including the BBC, have publicly apologised again for 'incorrect reports'. So little commitment to truth. Who, we might ask is the father of lies? John 8.44 reads: 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.' Moral teaching has its clearest origin and expression in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Our society derived its basic laws from that source. God speaks through them. But, now, confusion reigns and people are prepared to base their lives on half-truth and lies.

Brothers and Sisters, some might ask why, if there is a God, He would cause people to starve? Because, withholding food in animals triggers an increase in the readiness of the digestive tract to process food when it comes. He does not want to starve us, but to feed us when we seek Him. St Peter tells us (2 Peter 3.9) 'The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance.' When Jesus was hungry and tempted by the devil in the wilderness, He could have turned stones into bread: (Matthew 4:4) 'But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.' Countless times in the journey of the children of Israel into the Promised Land, their minds were on earthly matters; looking to find satisfaction through old perishable ways. Time and time again, Jesus has told the Church and all His creatures to repent and come to Him. When they do, the famine will be no more.