



Amos was a traveller. He transported livestock around the country. He was also a thinker. He had time to stand and stare. And he could see that things might look good but they were going wrong.

These people were not just making money by hard work but also by exploiting the poor. They had reached the top not just with natural flair but also with bribery and corruption. Their love of money had extinguished any principles they might once have had of fair play and justice.

The nation was going rotten at the heart. No-one had any sense of community or of social responsibility anymore because all they cared about was making money. They were obsessed. Even the days set apart for religious and social festivals were not enjoyed. They just sat around impatiently, waiting for the shops to open again. Family life was falling apart. Society was falling apart. They were becoming easy prey for stronger nations and soon destruction would come.

They thought they were on the right road. There is nothing wrong with wanting a comfortable life for yourself and for your children. But somewhere along the line the road to prosperity had taken them into paths of corruption and social disintegration. It is not an uncommon mistake.

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Martha, in our second story, does not come across as a greedy person but as a very generous woman. She is entertaining Jesus and several of his friends to dinner-in the days before Marks and Spencer and the microwave- and she is working very hard to make the meal as nice as possible. Having grown up in a society where a woman's place was exclusively in the home, the path of good cooking was the way to being a good wife and a successful hostess. Martha is confident that she is on the right track. She is entertaining a man who is something of a celebrity and the meal will be perfect. What more could she ask?

It is her sister who seems to have taken the wrong turning. She is not bothering about the dinner. She is sitting listening to Jesus and in that society women and men did not sit together socially. Mary was on the wrong track and Martha thought that Jesus should be telling her so.

Only he does not. He says *well actually, Martha, Mary has got it right* and no doubt waits apprehensively for the soup to be tipped over his head.

Both Martha and Mary are his close friends. They love him and want to make him happy. But if any of you were to be asked what the most important thing is about a good friend, I would guess that "listening" would figure highly in your answers. Of course we appreciate nice meals from our friends but listening is still so much more important. And if we have something on our minds that we are desperate to share with a good friend then the last thing we need is for that friend to keep rushing in and out of the kitchen to check the progress of the Beef Wellington and to ask us if we would like French or vinaigrette dressing on our salad.

A true friend will think of what you really need, not of what they want to do for you. They will be out to care not to impress.

I watched one episode of "Mary Queen of Shops" because Mary was working with a fashion boutique in Banstead where I used to live. (It did my ego a power of good to hear her describe the shop where I had bought clothes as "dowdy, geriatric and totally lacking in style.") The owner of this shop was working very hard and she was



what Barbara Trapido once called “*an obscene desire for achievement.*” Mary needed time to listen and she needed time to listen to him because he was the Son of God.

The road through life is so complex and the wrong-turnings are so many and so difficult to avoid that we need to spend a lot of time just looking and listening and thinking of where we want to be. And, speaking for myself, I need a guide who knows the right way for me far better than I will ever know it myself.

Amos said that a lot of his people’s problems had started when they stopped taking any notice of God. I know that religion can be as quick and as capable as anything else of taking wrong turnings and ending up at destruction rather than fullness of life but Amos was not necessarily talking about buildings and rituals and rules. He was talking about time for God, worship of God, acknowledgement of God as the higher power we need to guide us through life. Lose that and you only have your own strength and vision to rely on. And that is not enough.

Our children today have comforts and opportunities that their great-grandparents never dreamed of. They have the most exciting toys, the most state of the art bedrooms, the most crowded schedules and the chance to learn any skill they want. And this is wonderful for them.

But we are robbing them of their infallible satellite navigation system which will get them safely through all the complexities of life if we deny them the chance to know God, to spend time with God, to talk to God, to listen to God.

The promises we make at baptism are the most important promises we shall ever make for these children. Because we are starting them on the right road and we are putting their hands into the hand of God to keep them on the right road. And we shall have to keep putting their hands into the hand of God until the time comes when they will leave it there for themselves. Keep your promises for all our children’s sake.

Three thousand years ago, a shepherd boy sat on a hillside in Bethlehem and looked at his flock of sheep. He thought of how he always had to watch them, of how they would get themselves stuck in thorny bushes or on the sides of ravines given half a chance. He thought of the wild animals waiting to attack them and how he must protect the flock and take it safely to fresh pastures. *Life is like that*, he thought. And he wrote his most famous poem

*God is my shepherd. With him I shall have everything I need. He leads me in the right paths and guides me into safe places. Even when I have to travel through the darkest and most dangerous valleys he walks beside me and keeps me from harm. Everyone can see how much he loves me and I am happier than I ever I could be. Goodness and mercy will be with me as long as I live and I will walk with God for ever.*

A good beginning leading to a good ending.

Amen.