

Pentecost 8 C

July 22, 2007: Wesley 9.00 & 10.30am

Amos 8: 4-12

In today's reading from the Old Testament the prophet Amos announces some harsh words of judgement upon Israel.

They have conducted themselves in ways that are no different to other nations, even though they are meant to be a 'light to the world'.

Interestingly, the words of judgement are especially directed at their unjust business dealings and their unjust economic interactions.

Why would the God who so loved and cherished Israel judge it so severely?

It would seem that, for God, business issues are spiritual issues. And the condemnation is quite fierce.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land...
Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who lives in it...
I will make the sun go down at noon,
and darken the earth in broad daylight...
The time is surely coming, says the Lord,
when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, or of thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord. (Amos 8)

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The book of *Amos* was one of Rev'd Dr Martin Luther King's favourites.

It is a compilation of sayings and teachings that are attributed to the prophet Amos, who was active in the first half of the 8th century before Christ.

This was an unusually peaceful and stable time for Israel.

During this time, Israel reached the height of its territorial expansion and its national prosperity - a height it never again reached.

This was ancient Israel's 'golden age', if you like.

However, at the same time that many were flourishing, the prosperity led to great inequities

between the wealthy (mostly in the city) and the poor (mostly on the land).

Through systems in which the wealthy provided credit, which in turn created unsustainable debt for many, the bigger landowners amassed huge estates at the expense of small farmers.

The small farmers were becoming enslaved by their debt.

In the end, many had to give up land

that had been handed down from father to son for generations.

Into this scene stepped Amos, a farmer himself, and a herdsman, a native of a small village in the south of the Holy Land, in the kingdom of Judah.

Amos raised livestock and tended fruit trees. In vivid language, the prophet of the south condemned the injustice of the elites who used their good fortune to effectively enslave those who were less advantaged. You can perhaps hear why Martin Luther King liked to preach from Amos.

Worse, Amos pointed out, even though they “trampled the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth” , there was a smug kind of religious piety among the wealthy. In one of his better known pronouncements, Amos conveys the judgement of the Lord in this way:

I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me burnt offerings,
I will not accept them...
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
Let justice roll down like the waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (5.21-24)

All of Amos is still forceful prophesy. These words continue to cut, for example, into any Church that does little but feel pleased with its beautiful worship.

When you hear the context of Amos, this scene of wealth and disadvantage, it is easier to hear the judgement that Amos proclaims upon Israel in the name of God. It is easier to hear why Amos can condemn so forcefully those who he says are “buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of [their] wheat.” (8.6).

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We earlier asked the question:
How can a God who loves so much, judge so harshly?
I think the answer is:
God loves and therefore God must judge.

This God loves Israel and therefore will not leave Israel to its own devices.

God keeps coming back to them
this time in fierce judgement through the prophet Amos
so that they might become *all* they are called to be.

I often find myself pondering this question
about the judgement and the love of God,
and I am sure you do too.
It may be helpful to think of it like this.

A patient will go to the doctor if they have a disease.
The doctor will perform an examination and order some tests.
When the results are in, a diagnosis can be made,
and a course of treatment can begin.
Without that thorough examination, little can be done for the patient.
If you haven't identified and begun treating the actual problem,
love can only do so much.

The judgement of God – heard in the prophets of yesterday and today –
is something akin to that examination.
What is wrong with humanity is fully and honestly diagnosed
and then the restoration can begin.
If we allow God's voice of judgement (this examination) to be diminished then,
strangely, God's voice of love is also diminished.
We are left with little hope of seeing the rolling waters of justice
and the mighty stream of righteousness
that Amos dreamt of.

Karl Barth was a great theologian of last century.
He used to speak of the "No" and the "Yes" of God.
God's "No" to our darkness and injustice,
to our various failures to honour God's will, *must be heard*.
And it is only because we have heard the weight of that "No"
that we can hear the profound grace of God's "Yes",
and then participate in the dawning of the kingdom.
How can the God of love be such a telling judge?
An essential aspect of the grace of God is the judgement of God.

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May I make a small but important aside.
I have been talking here about judgement and not condemnation,
and to my mind there is a vast difference.
There are differing reports in the Scriptures about 'a final condemnation'.
The Bible does not speak of it with one voice.
And what's more, there are all sorts of problems,
real theological difficulties
and not just private, emotional (existential) difficulties,
with the idea that God is finally going to give up
on certain among his creation; that God is going to condemn.

There are no such difficulties, personal or theological,
with the place of the judgement of God
in the grand scheme of the salvation and perfection of creation.
In a nutshell, despite the fact that we are inclined to see
that judgement must of necessity lead to punishment and condemnation,
“it ain’t necessarily so.”
I am pleased to be able to leave those mysteries in the hands of God.

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Having said that, we betray the tradition of Amos,
and the other great prophets, if,
in leaving open the question about whether God condemns
we also leave open the question of whether or not God judges our failure to live
justly.
Acknowledging that we stand under not only the love
but also the judgement of God
is a consistent bell tolling throughout the Bible.

And so Christians live by the conviction that honesty is not possible,
that our true selves lie irretrievable under the layers of mistakes,
without some means of telling the truth about ourselves.
Becoming aware of that truth involves a God who loves us enough
to tell us the truth about ourselves and our destructive ways.
I expect that will be punishment enough, actually;
I find it punishment enough already: to be aware of God’s hopes – and our hopeless
response.

Where is God speaking that truth now? Where do we need to hear it?
You can answer that for your own life.
Against a broader canvass,
I wonder what Amos, the farmer and prophet would say about

- our remote Aboriginal communities and the state we have allowed them to reach
- the huge profits made on the back of people with addictions – to gambling or alcohol or designer drugs or credit cards
- the excesses of our ‘war on terror’
- about the way that we in the developed world seem to have written Africa off as a lost cause.

It almost doesn’t bear pondering how God must view these situations.
The only way to ponder that, to hear the ‘No’, and it must surely be a ‘No’, is to live
everyday consumed by the undeserved ‘Yes’. Then you can in fact look honestly at
the reasons why it is undeserved.
And that leads to repentance.

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Amos voices the words of a God
who speaks directly about our failings;
who keeps coming to us when we have made ourselves strangers,
so that we might turn *and live*.

Christ embodied this prophetic 'steadfast love' that does not give up but keeps talking
with us, keeps coming to us, keeps suffering with us,
in order that we might be all we were made to be.

This is what the great Reformers meant when they said
we are sinners who are saved by grace.

We might use different words today, but we know what they meant.

Only a crucified God who loves and forgives
will keep offering us the words of judgement we need to hear.

The question is: How will we respond?

Amos suggested as follows:

Seek the Lord, and live...

Seek good and not evil, so that you may live
[and] it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious... (5: 4, 14, 15)