

“THE MESSAGE OF AMOS”

Amos 5:4-24

I know there are quite a few of you here this morning who have joined this church after moving to Lichfield and looking around for a suitable place to worship each week. You've come from a variety of backgrounds and denominations, but have sought out somewhere that you find acceptable to put down some spiritual roots. And, if you're like me when I go round to other churches, you look out for little things (or maybe big things) that tell you something about the life and vision of the church – there's a kind of code you can decipher from looking at the notice boards, reading the weekly newsheet and visiting the website.

No doubt you take notice of the hymnbook that is used (or not, as the case may be), the version of the Bible used, the ways in which prayer is offered and used, the general demeanour of the congregation. A church that has lively worship, a variety of musicians, an emphasis on a particular type of teaching, a good offering, and imaginative special services might well win your approval.

So thought the people of Amos's day. They really went to town celebrating their religious feasts, they brought the best offerings to the place of worship, they sang their praises of God enthusiastically. They did all that they thought was demanded of them in their regular gatherings. Yet, in *Amos 5:21*, God speaks to them in some pretty uncompromising terms: “*I hate, I despise your religious feasts. I cannot stand your assemblies*”. Strong language to those who seem to be trying to please him! Why does he say it? I suspect it's not because he doesn't like the style of music or the fact that they don't have a children's talk. And what does it have to say to us today?

Well, in short, God gives the people that message through his prophet Amos because their outward show of worship is not supported by consistently holy lives. Much of this book of Amos – another of The Minor Prophets whose words we are considering on Sunday mornings at the moment – is taken up with fierce denunciations of God's people's duplicitous attitude to worship. They are bringing their offerings not only to Yahweh, the One True God, but to other gods and goddesses as well. They thought that once they had been through the ritual of worship, they could do what they liked the rest of the time. And God delivers a series of stinging rebukes of their attitudes to justice and righteousness. They might well be bringing to God what the Law of Moses required of them – the tithes, ritual offerings and sacrifices – but their real thoughts are often elsewhere. Look at what he says in *4:1* or *8:4-6*.

A month ago we celebrated *One World Week* at Soul Street and a little before that we held our Harvest Festival, focussing our thoughts on the poor and disadvantaged in this world. From time to time we acknowledge the difficulties that the vast majority of the populations of this world have to cope with. We make our offerings to TEAR Fund and Christian Aid, wrap up the boxes of gifts for children who lose out at Christmas, buy the odd pack of charity Christmas cards and an occasional box of fairly traded muesli from the Traidcraft stall. But what of our attitude to the issues the rest of the time? What of our thoughts and actions in between those little bouts of altruism? Yes, we thank God regularly for what he gives us so faithfully and constantly – but do we give the poor and disadvantaged of our world, of our society, a second thought as we accept all that God provides for us?

You see, for us, like those people in Israel who first heard this message which has probably lost much of its force for us today, the occasional celebrating of Harvest festivals and the like seems to absolve us from the responsibility of doing anything about the situation the rest of the year. I'm not talking about putting your odd coppers in the TEAR Fund box, or skimming off your chocolate money a couple of times a year for Christian Aid. I'm talking – and Amos was talking – about living in such a way that TEAR Fund and Christian Aid and the like shouldn't need to exist at all. The idea that we are really doing something to help stop such ludicrous and obscene inequalities in our world by giving our loose change to charity leads to all manner of casualties in our culture.

The people of Israel to whom Amos was talking had become so used to enjoying their comforts at the expense of those who were suffering elsewhere that they could not bring themselves really to sacrifice so that justice could be done. And nothing has changed in the 2,700 years since then. Here's a purely secular, but nonetheless challenging insight into the situation from the renowned American economist J K Galbraith. Fifty years ago in his seminal book *The Affluent Society*, he wrote:

Few things have been more productive of controversy over the ages than the suggestion that the rich should, by one device or another, share their wealth with those who are not. With comparatively rare and usually eccentric exceptions, the rich have been opposed. The grounds have been many and varied and have been principally noted for the exclusion of the most important reason, which is the simple unwillingness to give up the enjoyment of what they have.

To put it another way, people like us – the rich of this world – are generally too selfish to share with the vast majority of this planet – the poor – that which we enjoy as what we take to be our right. Once that attitude comes into play – and it is seen at its most pernicious and heretical in the teachings of the so-called Prosperity Gospel teachers (God wants you to have as much as you want, to have it now and wealth is a sure sign of his blessing) – once that happens, there are casualties: not simply human casualties, like we see from time to time when we have a collective crisis of conscience and some BBC reporter does an item from Ethiopia on famine or drought. For Amos, the two major casualties of such a selfish and grasping attitude are **truth** and **justice**. So let's reflect on that for a few moments this morning.

1. TRUTH

In 5:13 Amos tells us that “*the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil*”. I'd suggest that this “*prudent man*” is not the “wise” man of *Proverbs* and *Psalms*, but the man who thinks he's going to get on a bit better if he doesn't rock the boat. None of us really likes the person who is always campaigning on behalf of the poor and dispossessed, do we? We get fed up listening to him. We regard him as a single-issue maniac, an eccentric who is just being ungrateful to God for the things he's been blessed with. He makes us feel very uncomfortable. As Amos says in 5:10, “*you despise him who tells the truth.*” The people of Amos's day weren't too keen on listening to the prophets and those who spoke God's word uncompromisingly ended up in all kinds of trouble. But then, of course, they weren't very prudent about it.

Those who today try to speak out for the poor, who advocate a more thoughtful and equitable use of the world's resources, are abused in all kinds of ways. Dom Helder Camara, a Brazilian bishop who has faced all kinds of obstacles as he has tried to help the poor of that vast country, once said, “*If I give money to the poor, they call me a saint: if I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist*” – and what greater insult can there be for a Western Christian than to be labelled a communist.

Or they are just sidelined and ignored. Steve Turner's poem *The Prophet (Up To Date p160)* finishes with these words:

*No, you didn't stone the prophet.
You said there were crazies like him
Around in Ancient Rome
But Italy survives.
The official view was
Don't panic.
You didn't stone the prophet.
You didn't even censor him.
You didn't put him in prison.
You just put him in perspective.*

Or we adopt the attitude that one voice will make no difference, that the protest of the amateur prophet is so ineffective that there's no point making it at all. But if you've ever been gardening without the gloves amongst the roses and briars, you'll know that it only takes one little thorn to get under your skin to persuade you to put the gloves on. One voice that makes itself heard in the right place can certainly get things done. Some years ago the American sociologist and preacher Tony Campolo realised that the practices of a multi-national food conglomerate were highly offensive to those who took what the Bible has to say about justice seriously, so he and a few of his students bought one share in the company, one share that permitted them to go to the annual meeting of shareholders and there they made their point so tenaciously that the company eventually changed its policies.

We don't have that attitude about evangelism, do we? "Well, I won't do anything because it's only a drop in the ocean." We get on and do it. So why don't we speak out – and act out – in the name of truth? There is more to morality and following God's ways than whingeing on about street crime and binge drinking and teenage pregnancies: it's about institutionalised theft in the City and economic oppression at a national level, from which we all benefit.

2. JUSTICE

"All that is needed for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing." So Edmund Burke is reported to have said. Once we have decided that we are going to ignore what's going on around us, that we are not going to face up to the truth, then justice goes out of the window too. Amos mentions that time and time again in this prophecy – there is no justice. Wrongs that could be righted with the political will are continuing, because the rich like things that way. *"They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed"* (2:6,7). Now Amos is talking about things in a wider context than we are this morning and if we tried to cover all the ground that he does, we'd be here for weeks. But there is no doubt that he is concerned about the poor simply because the rich have priced them out of the market. In 6:4-6 his main complaint against the rich seems to be their conspicuous consumption in the face of oppression and impending doom.

So here we are, while a substantial percentage of humanity goes to the wall, feeding our faces and feathering our nests. And finding ways to justify it all. Remember, each of those starving people, each of those children dying of a preventable disease, each of those peasants whose land has been commandeered so that you can have cheap coffee, each of those villagers whose home has been washed away as a result of deforestation so that we can print another Christian paperback on how God wants you to have the very best – each of these individuals is loved by God. Jesus died on the cross at Golgotha not just for people like you and me, but for people like that – the same Jesus who applied to himself the words of Isaiah, *"The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news for the poor."* And we cannot simply fob the poor off with the promise of heaven if they just put up with their lot here on this earth – that's the stuff of institutionalised injustice, western pietistic imperialism – because Jesus also said he came so that *"they might have life and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). Are we frustrating his plan?

Amos could see truth and justice disappearing, along with compassion and unselfishness. What could be done? In 5:5,6 he says that the first thing to do is to *"Seek the LORD"*. Look to God and ask him what his will is in this area. And that shouldn't be too difficult to discern, because there's a book full of it here. The instructions are fairly clear most of the time – what muddies the water for us is the convoluted ways in which we try to interpret them so that we don't really have to do very much about them.

Then he gives us some more ideas about how to put things right in that wonderful sentence in 5:24, which provides such a stark contrast with his condemnation of the pious and empty religiosity of the Israelites' worship: *"Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream."* Here is what you could call the principle and practice of what we've been talking about.

RIGHTEOUSNESS is that changed attitude, that inner pursuit of holiness, of integrity, that means we are starting to think in the way God wants us to. I know I've said this before, but so much of our Christianity is about **what we do**, about giving the right impression, about looking right. And we can try to modify our behaviour without necessarily stopping to think the way the world does. We need to seek the Lord and ask him to give us new ways of seeing things, new sets of values, new attitudes to the world around us. We need to be thinking carefully about what we do with our money and our resources. Fair enough, we can put stuff in the charity box, or write the odd cheque when there's an appeal, but Amos describes this as "*a never-failing stream*", not an occasional puddle!

JUSTICE is the way we start to demonstrate those attitudes in practice. It is living them out and speaking out for them. Not only should our attitudes be changed but our behaviour transformed. It was the accent on justice for the disadvantaged that was a key factor in the distinctiveness of the Early Church, as Luke describes it in *Acts*. Through the ages it has been the Church's concern for justice, its care of the poor and dispossessed that has marked it out from other earthly organisations. And it is the reason for that justice that means it has been taken seriously. A Church that is squabbling over the type of hymnbook it uses, or the exact wording of the Lord's Prayer, that is complaining about the colour of the carpets or where they're going to park the 4x4 on Sunday morning while half of humanity starves to death has no business saying to the world around, "Listen to our message of good news".

So what can we do? How can we put into practice what God is saying here? Firstly, listen to some words of Senator Barry Goldwater when he was seeking the presidential nomination in the USA back in 1964: "*Let me remind you that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.*" If we believe that God really wants us as his people to "*let justice roll on like a river*" we need to do it with enthusiasm and commitment. And we need to overcome in our own minds the notion that because it's only a drop in the ocean it's not worth doing. If there weren't any drops in the ocean, there'd be no ocean!

Compared with the poorer parts of the world, we are people of resources, of education, of influence. Some of you have a great deal of influence in the places where you find yourself each day. Make your voices heard. Write to your MP, to members of the government – those of you who are involved in politics can actually speak to them. Think carefully about what you buy from the supermarkets – or, indeed, whether you buy from the supermarkets at all. Avoid the conspicuous consumption that Amos so condemned. Be less wasteful with the food you eat – don't throw so much away. Try fasting regularly – after all, it's biblical. Think whether you need your home quite so warm all the time. Do you need to use the car quite so often? Share resources with others. Think about whether you should follow fashion quite so slavishly. Ronald Sider, who wrote the powerful book *Rich Christians In An Age Of Hunger*, reckoned that virtually no readers of that book should really **need** to buy clothes for three years. And he also offered these two thoughts – *Question your own lifestyle, not your neighbour's* and *Think about how much of what you spend is simply for status and eliminate it*.

Some of those things might mean you have a bit more disposable income. Share it with others through the work of TEAR Fund, Christian Aid and other agencies. If Amos came back today, I'm sure he would have plenty to say to us. And I am equally sure that we would try to explain him away, to negate the effects of his words with platitudes about how much more complicated our world is today and how he doesn't really understand what's going on. Whether he did or not, there is no excuse for us to neglect God's world in this vital area.

Some of you will know that I am a bit of a hoarder. When I was preparing for this morning, because I keep all my old sermons I looked back at what I'd said when I last preached on this book, and that was almost exactly 15 years ago. And I reflected on whether it had made any difference to me and my lifestyle. In that time my stipend has increased by 53% (I keep all my old payslips, too) and I reckon I'm a lot more comfortable today than I was in 1993, despite lots of other factors. Did it make any difference to me, this book of Amos? Sadly, probably not. In those 15 years the plight of the poor in this world has not improved. There is still a huge gap between rich people like me and the poor majority of the world's population. In many ways, I embody all the things we've been talking about this morning, all the

injustices and inequalities that Amos condemned. That's a matter for me to try and sort out, to confess and repent. But I know I am not alone. What will you do, "*you who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground*"? The advice of Amos is, "*Seek good not evil, that you may live.*" Then we might be able to worship God with real integrity.

Discussion notes on the next page

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3. TRUTH

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4. JUSTICE

"All that is needed for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing" (Edmund Burke). In *6:4-6* Amos's main complaint against the rich seems to be their conspicuous consumption in the face of oppression and impending doom. But Jesus died on the cross for the poor as well as the rich – the same Jesus who applied to himself the words of Isaiah, *"The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news for the poor."*

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"Question your own lifestyle, not your neighbour's" and *"Think about how much of what you spend is simply for status and eliminate it."* (Ronald Sider)

Questions for discussion

1. How can we speak out for the poor effectively? Why should we do that?
2. Our lives are generally getting more comfortable (think back to the 1950s or 1960s, but don't spend too long reminiscing!), so why shouldn't we enjoy it? Isn't wealth a sign of God's blessing?
3. How can we *"seek the LORD"*?
4. What do you think *v24* really means? How can we ground it in the reality of everyday life?

5. In what ways should we as Christians be giving a lead in the debate over world poverty?