

## Reading: Amos 7 vv10-17

Can I just remind you. Last week, I said that if Jesus says He fills up or completes their prophecies, then, for us, a deeper understanding of His mission may come from knowing more of what the Old Testament Prophets actually said.

And I think a deeper love of our Bible. We must study scholars' conclusions to see the whole depth of the human experience revealed there, and the richness of the revelation of God

Today, our Minor Prophet is **Amos**: he of the basket of summer fruit, the plumb line and the ladies who are fat cows. The prophet of the righteousness of God.

### **What do we know about Amos?**

- We are told he spoke in the time of King Uzziah whose reign we can fix as the middle of the eighth century BC. This makes his words, chronologically, amongst the very earliest in our Bibles.
- Amos introduces himself, *"I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel."* (7 v 14-15) That's sycomore, which is a type of fig. So, another country person.
- **Israel**, note, because the Hebrew people were in his day separated into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. He was amongst the shepherds in Tekoa, which is just down the road from Bethlehem, in Judah, the southern kingdom. (1 v 1.) But he went north, to Israel.

### **What is the message of Amos?**

- There are two main strands to his message. The first is that Israel has been faithless and disloyal to the high purpose of God, His purpose for His chosen ones. The second is that it is God Himself who is calling up a most terrible punishment for Israel.
- Amos was speaking perhaps a generation before the Assyrians completely erased the kingdom of Israel from history. Including, sadly, its people. In 721 BC Israel, the nation of the northern ten tribes of Hebrews disappeared. Completely.

## What do we find in Amos?

- The book begins with words of judgement against the nations living around Israel and Judah. This was probably routine stuff from a prophet of the time.
- But then Amos goes on to include, amongst the nations with whom God is angry, the people of Israel and Judah. The people who said “we are the people chosen by God, God is on our side”. Not so, says Amos “*Woe to you **too**, Israel and Judah.*”
- So, the people of Israel were saying, “we have God on our side”; “We’re the chosen ones”; “We are all right”. And Amos says “No, God Himself is coming to destroy you”. It is God himself who calls up the foe. Look at chapter three verse nine “*Proclaim to ... Assyria... assemble upon the mountain of Samaria.*” Samaria is the capital city of Israel. It is God Himself who brings war: “*Hear this word that the Lord has spoken **against you**, O people of Israel.*” (3 v 1)
- God’s anger brings not mercy but utter destruction : “*As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued.*” (3 v 12) That is, not rescued at all but recovered in small pieces, very dead. And again, “*Thus says the Lord... in all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say “Alas! Alas!” they shall call you to mourning, and to wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you.*” (5 v 16)
- And perhaps most terrible of all: “*I will take **you** into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord.*” (5 v 27) So, where is the gift of the Promised Land now, the land of milk and honey?

## Why? Why should this terrible thing happen?

- It is a consequence of Israel’s disloyalty and betrayal of the ideals of the Covenant. Amos tells how it is. Look at chapter five, verses 10 and 11 – he describes oppression of the poor, crushing the needy, taking bribes, not administering justice.
- For it is God Himself who punishes. “*Because you trample upon the poor and take from him exactions of wheat, you who have built houses shall not dwell in them, you who have planted vineyards shall not drink the wine*”, (5 vv 11,16.)

- The rich women are particularly targeted at the start of chapter four *“hear this, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands ‘Bring that we may drink’.* Amos waxes lyrical about their fate; I wonder what personal encounter Amos had earlier that led to that? He speaks of the idle lives of well-fed people. So we have rich people accumulating wealth (there is a reference to a bed of ivory (6 v 4)) in a way that has led to oppression and injustice.
- The Covenant relationship requires righteousness in the people. This social injustice will bring a judgement. *“Behold the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground.”* (9 v8)

### **What about all those sacrifices?**

- Oh yes! Says Amos, the forms of religion are in place (5 v 21), the rituals are being performed, the ceremonies go on. *“Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days, for so you love to do!”* (4 v 4-5)
- Bethel is a centre of worship. Amos doesn’t see what happens there as welcome to God. “Come to Bethel”, he says, “and *transgress*’. That is, come there to do wrong! (4 v 4)
- But there is also something more sinister. In chapter five there is a reference to “Salkuth, your king”, to “Kaiwan your star-god”, and to “your images.” (5 v 25) So Amos perceives actual apostasy.
- Religion is empty of meaning, it results in no moral or ethical improvement.



All these years later, looking back at the words of Amos, and remembering the revelation of God that is Jesus Christ, **what does Amos say to us?** It is a question we must try and answer because you see in Amos a picture of God that is different to the Love that loves you and I so much that He embraces The Cross. Where is the God revealed to us by the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Jesus?

Remember that I said that this Book of Amos is amongst the earliest writing in our Bible. So, try to imagine what came before it. What was the thinking of the people who heard Amos speak, those

to whom Amos was sent? What was their idea of the God who was worshipped at Bethel and Gilgal?

They had their stories and their myths, their oral tradition, as scholars style it, the material that would be written up in Genesis, Exodus, Judges, et al. They had a bare religion of Holy Places, sacrifice, a tradition of being special to some God – oh! and circumcision. But they did not yet have Isaiah, nor any of our prophets. We have to see Amos pushing himself into a world that had no recognisable theology. Seen in that light, Amos is staggeringly innovative.

**Why? Why is Amos so innovative?** Where does he stand in the revelation of the nature of God, which is what our Bible is?

I think he gives us six lessons:

1. The first is that Amos tells us of **the majesty of God**. *“He who made the stars and turns deep darkness into morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the earth”* (5 v 8) And again, *“He who forms the mountains and creates the winds, and declares to man what is his thought; who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth – the Lord, the God of Hosts, is His name.”* (4 v 13) And before the Majesty of God, we bow in awe. How did Amos know? *“He saw the Lord!”* (9 v 1)
2. Then, Amos tells us that it is the **righteousness** of God that is so offended.
  - What does the word “Righteous” mean? It means virtuous, free from sin, morally good.
  - God intended the Covenant to affect human behaviour. It was an arrangement between two parties: I am your God, you are my people – yes, but also - I am good, you must be good.
  - And Amos is saying that the Israelites get nil out of ten for the effort they are putting in. The Covenant requires certain behaviour from them. God is not getting that. God is righteous, his people must be righteous.
  - If they are not righteous, specifically what are the people doing that makes Amos tell them off? I will list the offences: Making war; acts of violence; robbery; sexual immorality; the pursuit of wealth; drinking;

stopping prophecy; performing empty religious rites; selling the righteous for silver; trampling the heads of the poor; taking exactions of crops from the poor; perverting justice through bribes; afflicting the righteous; turning aside the needy. It is difficult to put into words the effect of this behaviour: it is all deeply offensive to God. Amos speaks for God - he says, "The people have rejected the law" and "they do not know how to do right".

3. Amos tells us the outward forms of religion are not enough. **It is the way we live that is of interest to God.** Some at least of the Israelites were continuing the traditional rites. Amos speaks of their sterility. Why? Why are the rites sterile? Because there is no care of other people, no understanding that God wants good lives, full of justice, charity, wholesomeness, righteousness. Without these virtues, the solemn outward signs, the trappings of religion are worthless. We are reminded of some words of Jesus, *"Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom, but he who does the will of my father."*
4. Amos says that his **God is the god of all.** It is clear that God has a special role for the Israelites and Judeans, but He also commands the Assyrians to do things, and He judges other peoples. Where were the gods those people worshipped in all that? Well, nowhere; because Amos sees all those peoples as within the care of the one God, his God. The only God. *"Did I not bring up the Israelites from Egypt?"* – yes – *"but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir."* (9 v 7) In the eighth century before Christ, that was some claim!
5. Amos says that God has warned the people, although these warnings have not been heeded. (4 v 6-11) The warnings show **the compassion of God.** God has warned the people more than once. Amos cites warnings given through famine, drought, blight, pestilence. So, God is slow to anger. He comes to the angry destruction, but only after warnings are ignored. So, Amos concludes, God is compassionate. He has showed compassion towards His people. This idea needs to develop further, of course.
6. And lastly note that Amos starts the authentic prophetic tradition that goes through our Bibles to John the Baptist. "The voice of one crying in the wilderness." (3 v 8) Amos

tells us that our **God** is a God that has spoken, and is speaking, and **will speak to His people**.

In his most famous passages Amos says that Israel has been measured and is found to be wanting; see the oracles of the plumb line (7 v 7), the basket of summer fruit which will go rotten. (8 v 1)

**Is there then no hope?**

**Well, yes.**

Look at what may be the final word from Amos himself. *“I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them, says the Lord your God.”* (9 vv 14-15)

Now did that prophecy become fulfilled? At one level, yes. Israel, the ten tribes, disappear from history, and no, they never came back, but the land around Samaria is now again in the state of Israel. Is that God’s action? There are those who say it is so. Israel awaited this for two and a half thousand years. If it was God’s work, then beware! Ask yourself about the *necessity* for justice towards the Palestinian people that the Covenant required and of which Amos speaks.

At an entirely different level, of course, God has moved entirely outside the human understanding of those words, but moved nonetheless to restore. For he has restored, hasn’t he? He restored not just the ruined vineyards of Samaria, but he has restored to you and I the very Garden of Eden. Even so is the Gospel of Jesus spoken of by Amos, eight hundred years before the archangel was sent to Mary.

If nothing else sticks in your mind, look in Amos for *the righteousness* of God. And look too – perhaps- at the world in which we live, our own society, and at our own individual actions. Let me remind you that according to Amos, what God finds so offensive – ‘Making war; acts of violence; robbery; sexual immorality; the pursuit of wealth; drinking; stopping prophecy; performing empty religious rites; selling the righteous for silver;

trampling the heads of the poor; taking exactions of crops from the poor; perverting justice through bribes; afflicting the righteous; turning aside the needy (by which I think he means ignoring them.)

To the nature of our God, how offensive is human sin! This revelation Amos brought to Israel and Judah. For eight centuries there was the thought burning, that God's righteousness was incompatible with the sin that seemed inherent in people. No amount of human endeavour would put that straight. And then the righteous God stretched out His grace towards His children in the person of Jesus. The archangel Gabriel did come to our mother Mary. Within the righteousness of God is the seed called Hope. Not some vague human wishing, but a very certainty, a God-given certainty, that out of the apparent chaos has come perfect order, a restoration. Men and women walk again in the garden, talking to God in the person of Jesus Christ.

31 July 2016  
Wade Street Church