

Sermon Pentecost 7 15th July 2012

Amos 7: 7-15; Ps 24; Eph 1: 1-14; Mark 6: 14-29

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Who then is this Jesus? The readings this month keep confronting us with that question. Although today, they seem at first to sideline Jesus, in favour of some other characters.

Amos, for instance. The little book of Amos is one of my favourites. It's found among the twelve minor prophets at the end of the Old Testament, but one special feature is that Amos is the first of the 'writing prophets'.

Before him there were characters like Elijah and Elisha, who spoke and acted but wrote nothing; after him it became normal for prophets to record at least the gist of their message as something of value for future generations, and sometimes, like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to write at great length.

To make sense of his prophecy you need to know that the great Jewish kingdom established by David around the year 1000 BC, and enlarged by his son Solomon, had fallen apart after Solomon's death in 920.

David's capital Jerusalem remained the capital of the little kingdom of Judah, in the south, but most of the twelve tribes formed the much larger kingdom of Israel in the north, based on Samaria. The northern kingdom enjoyed times of peace and prosperity, and it was here that Amos prophesied around the year 750 BC.

Amos was a countryman, from the hills of Tekoa, in the southern kingdom of Judah, and we can hear how he was disgusted with the luxury he saw. He talks about the rich lounging about on ivory couches, drinking wine in bowlfuls, demanding new songs to titillate their ears, and not noticing that some of their people are struggling, being sold into slavery – sold for a pair of sandals, he says – while the merchants cheat them with false scales, and the revellers say Who cares? Sing us another song!

Amos, speaking for God, says God will not accept the offerings of such people: 'I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies … But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (5: 21,24]. It is in this mood that we hear him today envisaging God holding up a plumb line, as a builder tests the straightness of a wall, and he hears God saying to the rulers, in effect, 'Your temple is bent, your royal house (both the palace and the dynasty that lives in it) is crooked – and both are going to come crashing down.'

Not surprisingly there was a reaction. Criticise the rich if you must, but to pronounce God's doom on the king and all his household sounded like treason. And who was this upstart to claim to speak for God, in the royal temple at Bethel? Were there not priests and prophets there already authorised to speak God's words?

The answer is yes, there were priests, like Amaziah, and prophets too. But the tradition of prophecy had been corrupted and domesticated. Prophets used to be wild men (and women) who went into trances and saw visions of how things might be – then swept in from the desert, like Elijah, to speak their often unwelcome vision to the king in Samaria.

But since that time the guilds of prophets had been taken into the palace as paid public servants. There is a satirical story of the king assembling his 450 prophets to ask their advice and (surprise surprise) hearing the same answer from each of them, the answer which they knew the king wanted to hear. But what if there was one prophet who stood out and said 'I don't agree!' That was a risky venture.

So now when Amaziah the priest says to Amos 'O seer, go back to Judah and earn your prophet's wages there, if you must', Amos says: 'I am not a prophet nor a prophet's son' (meaning I am not a member of one of your prophetic guilds, and I don't do this for pay). No, 'I am just a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees' – an itinerant agricultural labourer, one of the lowest of the low without an acre to call his own – 'but God took me from following the flock and said to me "Go, prophesy to my people Israel".'

Can you picture him, watching sheep on the hills of Tekoa, south of Jerusalem, [1: 1] and feeling growing within himself this conviction that he must go and speak God's word of judgement against the powers that be? It is the prophet's role, and it calls for great boldness.

It seems that Amos survived the king's anger, but seven hundred years later we see the same pattern repeat itself in Jesus' day when John the Baptist (who many people likened to Elijah) boldly challenged the power of King Herod, and paid the price. It is again a story about the corruption of the powerful, this time through the incestuous intermarrying of the Herodian dynasty contrary to the law of God. If it seems confusing that's partly because there are five people in the story called Herod.

Behind the action, there's Herod the Great, the king at the time of Jesus' birth, the founder of the dynasty. He had ten wives and innumerable sons, most of them called Herod (nothing egotistical about him!). Two of his sons feature here: Herod Antipas and his brother Herod Philip. Herod Antipas is called 'King Herod' though he was really only an administrator under the Romans, but he liked to act as if he was a king.

Then there is Philip's wife who was also part of the family, his niece in fact, and therefore called Herodias, and their daughter who Mark says was also called Herodias (a fair guess, though others call her Salome). All confusing enough, you may think: but then King Herod (who wasn't a king) decided to marry his niece who was also his sister-in-law, thus making his grand-niece into his step-daughter … and John said Stop! You can't do that (waving the law, in Lev 18: 16, in his face).

Herod of course did what he wanted to do, and arrested John to keep him quiet. No doubt this was not the only issue. Josephus, the contemporary Jewish historian, says Herod feared an uprising because John the Baptist was so popular.

Mark portrays Herod as a ridiculous and vacillating figure, who put John in prison and yet recognised him as a holy man; who was perplexed when he heard him (John probably made him think!), and yet he liked to listen to him; who in the end, despite all this, let his wife and her dancing daughter twist him into having John killed. It's like something out of a soap opera called 'The Herods', but the end result is that the one good and upright person in the story has his head brought into the banqueting chamber on a platter, like some grisly addition to the menu.

Amos and John the Baptist, just two bits of ancient history? Yes, but there's more to say. It's clear that Mark tells the story of John's death, at such length and in such gruesome detail, because Jesus too is a prophet, who will soon be on his way to Jerusalem to challenge the powers that be, the priestly establishment in the temple and the Romans in the palace, and he too will pay the price for his boldness in the name of God.

Mark even tells us that Herod thinks Jesus is John the Baptist come back to life to plague him (like Macbeth haunted at his table by Banquo's ghost), and we can be sure that Herod's friends in high places will deal the same way with Jesus.

And the story keeps repeating itself in Christian history, the tussle between those who are in power and those who dare to speak against them for God. Think of Thomas Becket, in the middle ages, and in our own day think of Christian leaders killed by order of governments: Archbishop Oscar Romero, Archbishop Luwum, and some who have spoken out and yet survived, like Desmond Tutu (and non-Christian leaders too, like the Dalai Lama; and Aung San Suu Kyi). I think it's hard for us to see the state as radically opposed to the way of God, enough to demand such boldness of leaders. But then we live in a peaceful land.

There is a challenge for us is to imitate such public figures and their public boldness, in their concrete situations; to finding the courage to stand up for God when necessary in our own lowly sphere, and in our own concrete situations.

But the more important question is about truth. Do we as Christians have access to a knowledge of what is right, in a society where there is less and less agreement about morality, or even awareness of what morality is? Without that grasp on truth, how do we first find a place of balance in ourselves which enables us to speak and act with integrity?

The real danger for a would-be prophet is not being assassinated but the spiritual lure of being taken over by the *love of competition, and by the pride* of thinking they must be right. It can be very exciting, to speak for right. It stirs the blood. But we can't fool ourselves that other people are always self-

serving, while *we* are always righteous. We know that is not true: the division runs right through each one of us.

We are the wealthy of ancient Israel who ignore the poor and please ourselves, AND we are the prophet who denounces them in the name of justice and the mercy of God. *We* are the Herods, enmeshed in power and pleasure, AND we are a John the Baptist who speaks to their conscience. Like Herod we vacillate, listening to the voice of conscience with fascination and horror, blowing in the wind.

Who then is Jesus? No, not just another prophet, like Amos and John the Baptist, another prophet who displayed the power of God and was killed by order of corrupt authorities. He was that, but we need to turn it round. These prophets, by their boldness, their willingness to give themselves to God, for good or ill, point to a pattern fulfilled in Jesus, a pattern in which death and resurrection are not tragic accidents but the core of his identity. What is revealed in his life, his death and his resurrection is a life and an identity into which we can be united. Does that reveal a place where we can stand?

This is a theme explored in the opening of the Letter to the Ephesians. I can't do justice to this passage now but let me invite you to read it in quiet, reflecting especially on what the author means when he says, twelve times over, that the reality on which we need to stand is found 'in Christ'. We are, he says, chosen 'in Christ'; forgiven 'in Christ'; given wisdom to understand God's deep purposes 'in Christ'; and finally promised an eternal inheritance 'in Christ'.

He is pointing to a personal reality, Christ, who is alive in God, and who invites us to find our life in him. Do we know that? Do we find that relationship with God in Christ in our own experience?

We live on earth amid the confusing and contradictory things of earth, where sometimes we have to stand up for God in the face of corruption, and where we are never quite sure we have got things right. But what if we have our deeper dwelling place 'in Christ'?

What if God has a counter plan for the history of the world, and we find it in Christ, in whom all the contradictory things of earth will finally be gathered up and made one? Is that is a rock on which we can stand amid the swirling currents of life?