

3rd Sunday before Lent, 5th February 2023
St Paul's Cathedral, 3pm Evensong
Amos. 2 4-end, Ephesians 4. 17-end
Mother Emma

This afternoon's readings do not make for easy listening!

The first, from the prophecy of Amos, deals with wrongdoing, judgment and punishment – none of which are fashionable topics in today's world - whilst our passage from the Epistle to the Ephesians reminds us in no uncertain terms of the ethical standards which those who follow Christ are expected to uphold.

Like many of the Hebrew books of prophecy, it is likely that the Book of Amos was shaped by a number of different writers at different times, but the book's introduction sets it in the eighth century BC, very shortly before the Assyrian Empire's conquest of Israel. I imagine that the people of this time would have been aware, as they went about their daily lives, that there was an impending threat brewing for their relatively small country from the competing powers and vast Empires around them. Perhaps they felt anxiety or fear as they looked at the present and the future and wondered what would happen next. In this climate of uncertainty, the prophets and those who followed them sought guidance and inspiration from the Word of God, from what Amos describes as *"the law of the Lord ... and his statutes"*, but others apparently turned their back on God, seeking comfort instead in the pagan religions which surrounded them.

It may have been anxiety or uncertainty, too, which encouraged the kind of wrongdoing which God condemns through Amos: greed, the oppression of the poor, the perversion of justice, and the breaking of promises, as people struggled to ensure their own safety, even at the cost of others. Amos declares:

"They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way".

Amos declares the Lord's anger at the way in which his Chosen People, whom he had led out of captivity in Egypt, have abandoned their worship and the inclusive and compassionate laws he had given them, and he describes the devastation which will come upon them. It is harsh stuff, and it is hard, in this passage, to see glimmers of light and hope, as we hear of God's anger and impending punishment.

Yet as we look to our second reading, the Epistle written to the Ephesians also in a time of oppression and occupation by a great Empire, it is clear that the same human nature is still at work, still manifested in greed and hardness of heart, but that the Ephesians have been shown a new way to live in Christ, should they decide to do so.

The Scriptures offer us insights both into the nature of God, and into the innermost workings of the human heart. They remind us of our tendency to focus on the self, and in times of anxiety, to turn to sources of comfort and defence which may or may not be helpful or healthy.

Over the past few years, we too have faced a time of increasing global turbulence. People regularly tell me they feel the world is out of control; that we can no longer rely on things and situations we believed were there forever; that they do not know what to expect and, like the people of Israel in Amos' time, they feel a sense of dread about the future.

The pandemic, global political tensions, conflict, climate change and the economic hardship brought about by the cost-of-living crisis have led many to try to find hope and security by battening down the hatches, putting care for self ahead of care for others and abandoning long-respected truths and support structures. Yet throughout the Bible, and not just in today's readings, we can find examples

of similar times of insecurity, poverty, plague and war which have the same effect, and we can see too, the ways in which Christ longs for us to respond to the anxiety and suffering we see and feel around us. Jesus defined the greatest commandments as those which urge us to love God, AND to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Amongst his most famous stories is that of the Good Samaritan – designed to prompt his listeners to address who our neighbour might be, and whether that neighbour might not be at all the people we expect.

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, this is elaborated further as,

“Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.”

Truth and mutual love are the overriding themes of this section of the Epistle to the Ephesians, and the resulting behaviour stemming from these will lead to a society in which, ultimately, we will find the greatest security under God himself.

“Speaking the truth to our neighbours” is more than simply being honest. It may involve speaking truth to those in positions of power and authority, speaking out when we encounter hostility or prejudice – or else, it might mean sharing something of our faith in Christ with those in darkness or despair.

The Epistle gives us the example that *“thieves must give up stealing [to] labour and work honestly”*, but the goal of this honest work is not simply a moral way to make money, but for a follower of Christ it is done in order *“to have something to share with the needy”*.

Putting up barriers and protecting oneself or one’s own is not the way God wishes us to live, but in opening ourselves to hearing and speaking God’s truth and sharing the gifts given to us with those in need, we fulfil our calling as Christians. The Epistle urges us to be careful and thoughtful in what we say, speaking words of love and encouragement and hope, and not constantly putting others down or stirring up conflict or division. We can see the effects - polarisation and disunity, hostility and prejudice - which grow from what the Epistle calls “evil talk” about others, and as God’s people we are called to speak out truthfully against rumours and false assertions which create this culture of suspicion.

The final sentence of our passage ends with a powerful exhortation – as relevant today as it was in the times of Paul or of Amos – that even when we feel paralysed or impotent at what is going on around us, it does lie within us to be Christ-like, and little by little, to bring in God’s kingdom of peace and justice.

“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Amen