

21st Sunday after Pentecost
The Prophet Amos
St. Anne's, Lee Summit
The Rev. Wm M Duncan-O'Neal
September 30, 2007

It is the Good News of the Gospel that all of us, together as a people, as a family out of many kindred's and tongues will be saved through God's forgiveness, mercy, and love. Today's lessons remind us that Christianity is a tough love faith based on sacrifice and justice—not some cotton candy, pink ribbon, warm kitten surface love. We shall receive much more than we deserve, but because it is God's nature to be just, it is our duty, responsibility, and care to see that justice is done for the poor, the sick, the mistreated, the alienated and those who count on us for hope. We are our brothers and sisters keeper. No one is given a free pass; no one can stand aside; no one can get huffy and claim that what we do is only our own business. My business, your business, our corporate business as a people is to do God's business and because the High, holy and eternal Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of the world is just, we who are made in His image must be just also.

This is the very heart of the matter: the way in which people behave towards each other and the way in which they worship God are inseparable. Twenty-eight centuries ago when Homer was writing *The Iliad*, the Greeks worshipped a pantheon of gods who were capricious, hedonistic, and mirrored the customs and vices of the Greeks. Elsewhere in the Mediterranean world there were a host of fertility gods to be sacrificed to for good crops and mild weather. And while renowned philosophers may have called upon society to be moral and ethical to one another, it is only the Hebrew prophets who were emphatic in declaring the practices of religion to be entirely null and void unless believers are treating their fellow men and women with mercy and justice.

Today the average person in the pew recognizes the names of some of the great prophets. We know the beautiful words of Isaiah, not just from Handel's Messiah, but also because we read portions of his writings fifty five times in the three-year cycle of the church's lessons. And we perhaps we recognize Jeremiah or Hosea too. But the earliest, the first of the great Hebrew prophet's writings only turn up 4 or 5 times in the course of three years of Old Testament readings—so, perhaps, most don't know Amos. But we should because 700 years ago this man came down from the small mountain town of Tekoa and caused an earthquake, which shook and permanently shifted the foundations of the Jewish faith. He declared that essential to the very nature of the one immortal and omnipotent Lord God of the universe is justice. And because God is just, we his people are called to be just too. Amos declared this was not an option but a must.

Amos exercised his prophetic ministry around 755 B.C. He had been a shepherd and tended sycamore trees. He was not born to the priestly clan. He was a layman, but he was called by a burning sense of moral righteousness and social justice to prophesy to the people. He was not a sensitive or poetic guy. He definitely did not preach smooth things like the court and temple prophets of his day. He was stern, austere, and

uncompromising. He preached in the northern kingdom of Israel at Bethel, the center of religion equal to Jerusalem in Judea.

There had been a 60 plus year period of peace and prosperity for the 12 tribes of Israel/Judea, and, being located on the main trade routes from Egypt to Assyria, the Jews were able to collect fat tributes from the caravans, which passed through their land. The prosperity had lasted long enough so that by the time that Amos spoke, there was general corruption—landlords foreclosing mortgages, large estates swallowing up small farms, judges taking bribes while looking the other way and widespread decay in moral values. The leisure class lay around on their beds of ivory drinking copious amounts of wine, and developing elaborate forms of entertainment for their amusement, which included long and pompous religious ceremonies with great pageantry and clouds of incense intended to appease God. Amos was faced with a bored and indolent ruling class who oppressed and ignored the weak and poor who slaved for a crust of bread.

The prophecies of Amos are almost unrelieved gloom. He could clearly see that the softness and corruption at the heart of Israel would make her fall like an overripe plum, an easy prey to powerful invaders from the north. While it would be 30 years before it happened, Amos could see the Assyrians advancing to pillage and destroy.

To Amos, God was the Lord God of hosts, a Sovereign who ruled the heavens as well as the earth, nature and all nations. To the prophet's eyes God's chosen people did not have a monopoly on the one true God. Yes, it was true that God had established a special relationship with them, a covenant when he had brought them out of Egypt and given them a land of milk and honey, but on this account they were held to a higher standard than other nations. They would be judged more strictly.

Reading his prophecies, we are left with an overwhelming conviction that God is God, right is right, and wrong is wrong. Amos's sense of justice was little seasoned with mercy. He had little concern to make his message "acceptable." He was under constraint to speak unhappy truths—strong tonic to the people of his day and to our modern ears as well. For many of us today are afraid of denouncing evil for fear of being called intolerant; we are not allowed to be morally indignant because some pop psychologist says what is making us angry is an identical fault in ourselves! We are not expected to stand firmly for definite values of right and wrong, for after all, our culture suggest that right and wrong are relative, though relative to what is not made clear.

What about the state of the poor today? We know more about conditions around the world than ever before: the pictures of needless suffering and death on every continent startle, and as much as we know is possible, collectively we are doing so much less than we could or should. We try to satisfy our conscience with small voluntary acts of charity one on one—volunteering for food kitchens and clothing drives that do help alleviate those at hand, but is it enough? What is this mantra we've been telling ourselves these past twenty years that less government is necessarily better government? Why do we insist on electing people who agree to cut taxes, cut taxes when its poor pregnant girls who won't get medical help and millions will continue to be condemned to

trailer houses or worse all their lives because society will not provide affordable housing? There are so many uncomfortable injustices in this land and this world that we as a people together could change. What would Amos say to us today?

For things done and left undone, good Lord, forgive us. Mercy, justice, and faith must work together. But because of the human tendency to evade this truth, the word of the Bible is bound to unsettle the comfortable, as it should. For here God, not man is master. Here God speaks, and men and women, if they are open to change will listen with humility.

A final postscript: Within a few decades after Amos preached, four kings of Israel were assassinated, the final king deposed and the northern tribes of Israel were swallowed up by the Assyrian empire and disappeared into history.