

AMOS - A Reluctant Prophet

We thank you Lord for the words of your Old Testament Prophets, many of whom looked forward to the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, and thus may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be ever acceptable to you, our Lord and our redeemer. Amen.

Today we are back to look at another Old Testament prophet, and this time it's Amos. Many prophets foretold the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the exile and the return and, of course, the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. But most were also hoping for a time when at least there would be justice, mercy and a coming back to Godliness. We heard about Isaiah's prophecies on all of this a few weeks ago and Amos continues in much the same vein.

Amos was one of the so called minor prophets, 'minor' only by virtue of the length of their books, not by way of being at all minor in their writings or actions! Amos was among the most outspoken when it came to letting the Israelites know where they were going wrong. He was one of those who foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile, and his countrymen didn't like what they were hearing!

Amos' ministry as a prophet came about in the latter part of the reign of Jeroboam II, in the time when Israel was divided into two nations. Judah in the South and the many tribes of Israel in the North. Jeroboam reigned between 786 and 746 BC. We know that Amos was around during Jeroboam's reign but he only felt called as a prophet toward the end of it. Most scholars agree that his book was written around the year 760 BC and that it was actually Amos who both wrote and edited it. It was a time of unprecedented prosperity in the land, but as is so often the case, for the few rather than the many! This is very probably why Amos saw so much going wrong and that someone needed to say and do something about it!

Amos came from humble stock. He says himself - "I was neither a prophet nor a prophets son, I looked after sheep and took care of sycamore trees". He lived in Tekoa, a small town in Judah about twelve miles from Jerusalem. To the East, looking toward Moab and the Dead Sea was desolate and wild country, it was here that Amos tended his sheep and his sycamore trees.

Sycamore trees were pollarded, that is the large branches cut back and the smaller growth used for all sorts of fencing, roofing and basket making. As he said, he had no background in prophecy but he seems to have received his prophetic words through visions, we would more likely call them dreams nowadays. In one of these visions Amos was impelled by God to go not to Jerusalem, the nearest large conurbation, but to Bethel in the North. Here he meets Amaziah, who we would now call the 'priest in charge' in Bethel. And Amaziah doesn't like what he hears! He reports to king Jeroboam what Amos says - 'You will die by the sword and Israel will go into exile, away from their native land'. We are not told of the king's reaction to this, but it all happens exactly as Amos has prophesied, although the destruction of Jerusalem comes about many years after Amos death.

It would have come as no surprise to Amos that his message was not one that either the priests or people in Bethel wanted to hear. Under king Jeroboam the country had become prosperous, those who had money lived ever more luxurious lives, but this has led, as it almost inevitably does, to moral corruption, lawlessness and rampant idolatry. Although most Israelites considered themselves very religious and to be keeping the law of Moses, sacrifices were made, offerings given and temple visits strictly adhered to. But somehow "The Good Life" had taken over from the love of God and those in authority didn't want to see any changes. But Amos persisted, God had told him to do it and he was not going to be stopped. "The sovereign Lord has spoken" he said "who can but prophecy?"

The Israelites relationship with God, in Amos time, was totally bound up with the Covenant. This was the law that Moses had been given directly from God. It was being at best ignored, at worst completely forgotten. Amos is the first prophet to actually say that the covenant was being broken. As is so often the case when society is divided into the "Haves" and "Have-nots" love, mercy and compassion for the weakest in the community was completely lacking. The hand of God was never far away from Amos and many times he uses the words "This is what the Lord says". God is watching Israel's sinfulness and He will act, if man will not. It is the constant Biblical view that earthly relationships also have a heavenly dimension, actions between God's people, for good or bad, provokes actions from God.

Amos tries hard to change things and goes to deliver his message at the synagogue in Bethel, the most important religious sanctuary in the country. He is understandably not popular and Amaziah tries to get him evicted. He writes to King Jeroboam, as we heard earlier, but it seems that Jeroboam takes no notice, surely Amos is just another crackpot, there were many around at the time. But Amos persists, for this is not just his own rhetoric, it comes from God, and is vital for the survival of his nation.

But God's judgement is that Israel should have known better. "The time is now and I will spare Israel no longer" says the Lord. And, in the end, they are indeed overthrown and end up in exile in Babylon. As we hear from Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked for songs. How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land. If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill, if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy".

But as with nearly all the prophets there is light at the end of the tunnel, there is hope. If Israel learns the lesson and returns to God Amos knows, for God has told him, that the people will come back from exile and live again in their land. And Amos' book ends on a high note. "The days are coming" declares the Lord, "when I will bring back my people, they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine. They will make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be removed from the land I have given them". And Amos's final words are - "Thus says the Lord your God!"

This all seems frighteningly familiar. It is a biblical theme that we find repeated right through to Jesus Christ himself. "Love God and your neighbour and all will be well with you". Paul puts it succinctly. "I believe everything that agrees with the law and that is written by the prophets, I have the same hope in God. I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man".

The prophecies of Amos are indeed pretty heavy stuff. He, as we might say, 'shoots from the hip' and very little is held back about how bad things will be for Israel. But as is usual with all the prophets there is still hope. And thus there is hope for all of us if we too are prepared to change and follow the example given us in Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith demands faithfulness to the will of God. And faithfulness to God demands justice in human relationships, at a personal level, at a national level and at an international level. Christians today are called upon to act firmly against all injustices. Peace, justice and love are true Christian values. When human accomplishments are used for the good of all that brings about the true meaning of - 'love God and your neighbour as yourself'. Amen.