

Amos 3:9-4:13 for online service 23rd August 2020

All Bible quotations are from the NRSV.

A couple of weeks ago Kate preached on Acts 11 and 12 and started by asking whether we wanted the good news or the bad news. Well, today's reading seems to be all bad news. I feel for Amos, the shepherd who was sent by God from his home in the southern kingdom of Judah to tell the people of the northern kingdom, Israel, what they should expect. And what bad news he brought. The day was coming when God would judge and punish Israel for its sins, with destruction of homes and shrines, and a people forced into exile and captivity (forty years after Amos wrote Israel fell to Assyria). And all of that would only be the sequel to the famine, drought, blight, mildew, locusts, pestilence, war and death which God had already sent in an attempt to persuade his people to return to him. Not good news, then; in several places in this passage my Bible mentions that the meaning of the original text is unclear, but there is no question of the central message, that disaster is on its way. Why? Where had the Israelites gone so spectacularly wrong?

Amos saw two main areas where the Israelites had fallen short of what was expected of them as God's chosen people. The first of these is a lack of social justice. Although Amos was warning the people of impending doom, he prophesied during a time of relative peace and stability. This, however, had not been good for everyone, and the lifestyles of the rich were maintained through the oppression of the poor and needy. The law obliged the wealthy to help the poor, but this is not what is happening. Instead, they store up plunder in their fortresses, and despite this looting think themselves secure, perhaps even beyond God's reach, in those very strongholds. Their concern is their own comfort, living in houses decorated with ivory and having enough to drink (not water, I think, in this context), not what others were experiencing. Perhaps they felt that their wealth was a sign God was pleased with them; perhaps they felt that if life was so good, they did not need God. They were, of course, wrong on both counts.

A slight digression here, to explain about the "cows of Bashan" in 4:1, which is Amos's description of the women of Samaria, the capital of Israel (Jerusalem was the capital of Judah). Bashan, in what is now Syria, was known for its good quality cattle, referred to as well in Psalm 22 and Ezekiel 39. So while Amos is being rude about the women here, what he is getting at is their privilege

and how pampered they are, not what we might necessarily think of now if we heard the word cow used as an insult.

The first reason for the approaching judgement, then, was this social injustice; the poor oppressed and crushed, the rich arrogant and self-indulgent. God's people should have a greater sense of responsibility to the poor than anyone else, not less, but instead they have hardened their hearts against them.

Hand in hand with social injustice goes false religion. In 4:4-5 Amos launches God's stinging attack on the religiosity of his people. Everything they are doing is wrong. Why? Well, like the other areas of their life it is all about them and not at all about God. In Matthew 6:1 Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your father in heaven." That, however, is exactly what the Israelites are doing. They are sacrificing, bringing tithes and making offerings – although not any guilt or sin offerings, interestingly but perhaps unsurprisingly- far more often than they need to, not because God wants that, but because they want to show off, virtue signalling as we might put it now. Who is the most pious? Me, me, me! Like the Pharisee described in a parable in Luke, they believe their outward show is what is important. But their worship is made up of empty rituals, meaning nothing. God knows that; he is not interested in their excessive outward pretence at faith but in what is in their hearts, and there he cannot find any true belief or repentance.

For Amos, to serve God is to practice justice, not to join in empty worship and make pointless offerings; you cannot truly worship God if at the same time you are mistreating and neglecting those in need. Jesus says of the scribes and Pharisees, "you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law; justice and mercy and faith." Those three things should have been at the heart of the religion and the life of God's people, but they had been forgotten.

Judgement, then, was coming, because God's people had forgotten not only their obligations to each other, particularly those who were struggling, but also how to worship their Lord. But there is always hope. Anyone who heard me talking about the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 will know that I struggle with what I'm afraid I do think of to myself as the more smite-y parts of the Bible. And you will probably therefore not be surprised to hear that as I have read, thought about and prayed about this passage, I have found some chinks of light in all the darkness, both for Amos's contemporaries and for us now.

The first of these comes in 3:12. On the face of it this is a rather strange and grim verse – and by the way, the second part of this verse is one of the places where the meaning of the original text is not clear. But to explain the beginning of the verse, if a sheep had been savaged by a lion, the shepherd would need to retrieve part of that sheep to prove that he hadn't just made off with it himself. And in any case a shepherd would do everything possible to save that sheep or at least get as much of it back as he could. Amos, who was a shepherd, would have understood that very well, and God, the ultimate shepherd, would have understood that perfectly. He did not want to destroy his people utterly; a remnant would survive, in recognition that something good was still there. Mercy is shown, as it was from the beginning, to Adam and Eve. The people of Israel may have forgotten about their covenant with God; he could never, he will never, forget.

If God judged Israel and found it wanting because of the oppression of the poor and needy, that gives us guidance as to how we should live today. One of the most powerful parts of Matthew's gospel is, appropriately, Jesus's description of the day of judgement and the dividing of people into the sheep and the goats. The sheep are those who are to be saved, because "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." They ask when they had done so, and are told "just as you did it to one of the least of my family, you did it to me." The social justice which was so lacking when Amos prophesied is spelt out to us here; this is what we need to do.

Finally, I was struck in Amos by the two -rather different -references to drink. The Samaritan women ask their husbands for what I would imagine was wine; meanwhile God sends drought on parts of the country. There is a crucial similarity between these two points; in both cases, thirst is not satisfied. This made me think of John's gospel and the meeting at the well between Jesus and, oddly enough, a Samaritan woman. Jesus makes clear the distinction between the water she is fetching and the living water he provides: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman pleads to be given this water; she recognises her thirst. Amos had been sent to people who did not recognise their thirst, who did not see that what they really needed was God. Even now, what we truly hunger and thirst for, whether we are like the

Samaritan woman in John who acknowledges it, or the Samaritan women in Amos who do not acknowledge it, is God.

So, on the face of it, this passage from Amos is all bad news. God is going to judge his people, and judge them harshly. But there is always hope. It may appear that God has written off his people, but some would survive; he would rather save than destroy, indeed that was why he had sent so many warnings to make the Israelites change their ways. There is also guidance here for us as to how we should live. We should not be focused on ourselves and unconcerned about the needs of others, or making a show of our piety. Instead we must care for the needy and the oppressed, whoever they may be, and recognise that what leaves us thirsty is a lack of living water from God, After all, he is our stronghold, and the source of all that we need. Amos told the people of Israel that they had forgotten who they were meant to be. Nearly 3000 years later, we can still use his words to remember who we are meant to be.

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