

Amos 7.7-15; Psalm 85.8-13; Ephesians 1.3-14; Mark 6. 14-29

Quite often, in fact most often, the picture on the front of the order of service and on the poster on the outside noticeboard reflects one or more of the readings for the Sunday – usually the gospel. But not so today – we have a very pretty but quite innocuous picture on the front cover. A sunrise, I think?

What might have been an alternative then? The well-known Caravaggio painting of Salome with John the Baptist's head on a platter? Or is that not quite the image we want to give of what church is about? Is it more comfortable to stick with images that underline that church – as it should be – is a worshipping, welcoming, caring, place that offers comfort and hope. But that I think is only part of the picture of what church is called to be. To do any less endorses the opinion of many that the church is irrelevant to their lives. We are of course people who see everything from Creation onwards through the lens of the resurrection, as Christians we can do no other, but we mustn't forget Good Friday is also part of that story.

I expect everyone here has experienced something this past week, even if short lived, that has felt difficult, sorrowful, worrying or painful. These Good Friday experiences on a small or larger scale are part of the human experience for people of all faiths and none, and this past week has certainly brought reminders of some of those on the larger scale as we remembered the 10th anniversary of the London bombings, the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre when more than 8000 Bosnian Muslims, mostly men and boys, were killed. As we watched on our television screens as the bodies of tourists were re-patriated after the killings in Tunisia, and of other atrocities across the world, not least further beheadings of Syrians by ISIS, who in all they do are abusing religion for political cause.

And Amos, writing some 2,800 years ago in the reign of King Jeroboam II, had something to say about that. In fact it seems to me that what Amos had to say is as relevant today as it was then.

Jeroboam's kingdom was characterised by territorial expansion, aggressive militarism, and unprecedented economic prosperity. Times were good for many people, or so they thought. The people interpreted their good fortune as God's blessing and Amos tells us the people were intensely and sincerely religious. But in reality it was the privatised religion of personal benefit. Believing in and worshipping God because things were going well for them. BUT ...they ignored the poor, the widow, the alien, the orphan, and in effect their religion brought faith down to the level of no more than culturally acceptable rituals. And to make it worse not only did the religious leaders not call the people to account, they actively sanctioned the religious and economic status quo.

Enter Amos. When someone new comes into our orbit we often want to know what they do, or what their parents did, where they come from and all such things, don't we? And for good or ill, we can decide whether or not to then use that information to weigh up whether or not that person has anything worth listening to, or getting to know and so on.

Well Amos didn't tick any of the right boxes when he came along with his prophetic word, for he was neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet in what we might call the professional sense. The authorities couldn't quite get a handle on this shepherd, farmer, and tender of fig trees. He was a small town boy who had grown up in Tekoa, about twelve miles south east of Jerusalem and five miles south of Bethlehem. The religious and political elite despised him as an outsider, and a very unwelcome one at that because they could see that Amos was not going to "know his place" and keep quiet.

I am sure you can think of parallels in our own society today – the “who do they think they are telling us what to do” response that so often prevails when wise and challenging words are offered into situations where we would prefer to keep the status quo.

Amos does not mince his words when he describes how the rich have crushed the poor, and neither does he spare Israel’s religious leaders who have sanctioned the political and economic status quo.

But there is another voice in this story. The voice of Amaziah the priest who does all he can to discredit Amos, saying that his preaching is unpatriotic and seditious and he tries to get him chased out of town.

Amaziah reveals how completely corrupt he has become when he reveals how he identifies religious faith with political power and economic gains. It sends a chill up my spine when I hear his words to Amos, “Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.” (7.13)

No Amos won’t be bullied and finding, courage in his trust in God, he holds fast to the message he has been entrusted to bring to these people, and in graphic detail warns of the consequences of those who sell their soul for economic and political gain.

There is nothing in scripture about how Amos died, but we do know what happened to John the Baptist, and of course to Jesus, when they spoke out against political and religious corruption.

The church has a chequered history in its relationship to politics. Some have followed Amaziah – we might think of the German Christian movement that supported Nazi ideology, the Dutch Reformed church that supported apartheid in South Africa, and the Russian Orthodox priests who collaborated with the KGB, to name but some.

But there are of course many inspirational examples, throughout history and in this present day, who have continued to follow Amos, John the Baptist, and Jesus as they speak out against corruption, within not only within the political systems of the state but also within the religious institutions to which they belong when they begin to collude with that corruption.

It is not an easy thing, and it can literally or metaphorically lead to heads on platters, but each day as church, both as individuals within it, and as the larger body to which we belong, we are called to respond in prayer, word and action to the injustices we see on our doorsteps – how can the need for foodbanks be a good thing? who are the people who are going to suffer most a result of some of the announcements in the recent budget? how do we respond to the strangers in our midst? – do we even know who they are? ...and then of course there are the wider and global questions.

Is it easier then just to take the path of Amaziah and do all we can to keep the status quo, or have we the courage, like Amos, to trust in God and follow the path that leads to the furthering of God’s kingdom? That is a question I struggle with day by day, as I expect you do too, but is a question we need to keep struggling with so that the time will come, as the Psalmist longed for, when “mercy and truth have met together; (and) righteousness and peace have kissed each other”....

Christ Church Morningside

Registered Charity SC003009