

John Docherty, November 12, 2017
Amos and James – setting the bar

The prophet Amos isn't one of the more popular prophets. You'll rarely hear him quoted, and most of us have probably never gone out of our way to read him – unless you've decided to read the entire Bible and didn't skip over the shorter books.

I think there might be a couple of reasons why we don't hear more about Amos, other than the fact that his is a smallish book buried in between the even smaller books of Joel and Obadiah.

For one thing, he's a bit of a buzzkill in some ways. The entire book is a litany of depressing and dire predictions of coming destruction, and God's impending wrath against the nation of Israel. With the exception of the very last six verses of his book, in which he promises that the day will eventually come when God will “... restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them ...”, the rest of the book is full of doom and gloom.

But, as Marc Paré has reminded us from time to time, that's a prophet's job – right? The prophet is called out specifically to bring words of warning in the hope that the people will take heed, change their ways, and avoid the consequences of their behaviour.

The passage that we read this morning, for example, is replete with not-so-subtle hints that God is angry with Israel, and uses some very strong language to get that point across :

- I hate, I despise your festivals,
- I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
- Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them;
- the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.
- Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

It's a pretty damning condemnation of the emptiness of their ritual, and their lack of recognition of what is **truly** important in God's eyes.

He's a serious guy, this Amos, and I don't have any reason to think that he was possessed of a sense of humour, but I have to admit that I couldn't read the first part of today's passage without thinking of Peter Haresnape's meditation from last week, and his “good news / bad news” progression.

Let me read the passage again with that structure in mind.

“The good news is the Day of the Lord is at hand;
The bad news is that as far as you're concerned God will come after you in that day like a lion to destroy you;
The good news is you'll be able to flee the Lion of God;
The bad news is your flight will lead you to a bear, waiting for you;
The good news is you can take shelter from the bear in a nearby house;
The bad news is that when you lean against the wall in relief, you'll be bitten by a snake;”

He's a cheery guy, our Amos.

But, as I said, that's the job of the prophet – to make it clear that something has to change or disaster will fall.

And it's perhaps worth noting that Amos is the oldest of the prophets for whom we have a written record of their message, after Moses, Elijah and Elisha. He was writing around 760 BC. I think that's worth noting because Amos, to some extent, sets the tone for the prophets to come – certainly for the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and even Jesus.

And his message is a fairly straightforward one. He's setting the bar for what God expects of us in our behaviour – God wants our love, worship and obedience, but that needs to be lived out in ways that reflect God's own character :

Amos' specific criticisms of the nation are these :

- you sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals;
- you trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way;
- you take garments as collateral against loans, depriving the poor of their basic needs;
- in the house of God you drink wine bought with fines you imposed unjustly;
- you oppress the poor;
- you crush the needy;
- you hate the ones who reprove you in your error, and you abhor the one who speaks the truth;
- you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain;
- you afflict the righteous;
- you take bribes;
- you push aside the needy in the gate;
- you trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land;
- you cheat on your measures, and practise deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.

Well, these criticisms clearly aren't directed at the poor, they're directed at those who have power; those who should be protecting the more vulnerable and living with integrity.

It's tempting for somebody like me to home in on that fact and somewhat smugly think “well, that let's *me* off the hook. I come from a working class family – the ones who have been traditionally oppressed by the ruling classes.”

It's tempting, but fortunately I have grandchildren who are a little more tuned in to the reality of my life, and who are secure enough in themselves to sometimes take me to task on my innate working class smugness.

This past summer when we were on vacation with our two grandsons, I got into a conversation with Elliott, the eight year old. I forget what exactly we were talking about, and why I made the comment I'm about to share with you, but at some point, I said to him, in response to something *he'd* said : “well, maybe we're just poor”.

He stared me down, and in a very no-nonsense kind of way made it clear that that just wasn't going to wash.

“You're not *poor*”, he said, clearly contemptuous of my attempt to justify whatever point was in play. “You've got a humungous house – well, maybe not humungous, but it's pretty big for just two people – and you've got a car, and we're on vacation. You need money to go on vacation!”

This boy is no fool. And he's right. I don't get let off the hook quite that easily.

Even if I'm not quite an oppressive member of the ruling classes, and even if Amos' words of warning don't quite apply directly to me, I *am* targeted by the words of James that were also read this morning, and that echo Amos, but in a less stratified way.

“You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’, also said, ‘You shall not murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have

works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Unlike the words of Amos, most of James' words aren't directed at rulers and the rich. I say "most" of his words aren't directed at the rich and powerful, though some of them definitely are. They're mostly directed at his brothers and sisters; they're directed at any who claim to have faith and to be trying to love their neighbour as themselves; they're directed at you; and they're directed at me.

They're setting James' bar for what God expects of our behaviour.

I'm a big fan of the Book of James. It's maybe partly because I'm a bit of a masochist and a masochist idealist at that. I need things that challenge me, and James' message to the church is a very demanding message.

But I'm also a big fan of this letter because James is a very "grounded" letter. It's not overly other-worldly and spiritual in the sense of focusing on a totally internal personal piety.

But I do think it's deeply spiritual in the sense that it recognizes that our faith needs to be lived out in the real world – in the world of shared relationships, and shared responsibility for the important things of life.

James recognizes that our relationship to God is profoundly connected to our relationship to each other, in the same way that Jesus linked the commandment to love God with everything you have to the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself.

Elsewhere in his letter he has other pearls such as :

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Or, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom."

Or, "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no,"

And what is probably my favourite verse of all : "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you." That, I think, is one of the most comforting promises of the entire Bible.

It's a letter written by a man who, like the prophets of the Old Testament, isn't afraid to set the bar high. But he doesn't set it impossibly high, in the same way that Amos doesn't set *his* bar impossibly high.

It's not so unreasonable to expect that judges act with integrity and not take bribes.

It's not so unreasonable to expect that one use honest weights and measures in one's business.

It's not so unreasonable to expect that one's "yes" be yes and one's "no" be no.

It's not so unreasonable to expect that we be prompted by simple human compassion to at least *try* to help out someone who is cold and hungry.

It's not so unreasonable to expect that one not defraud a worker of his or her wages.

None of this is unreasonable, and none of this is out of our reach.

The bar is high, and it's the same bar for all of us.

We are to draw near to God by living out our lives with compassion and integrity, by trying to be better than we usually are, and we have the promise that God will draw near to us in response.

It's not so unreasonable a request.