

*John Docherty, September 25, 2016*

**For the love of money ...**

The two passages that were read this morning, Amos and Timothy, may seem a little disconnected one from the other. One is taken from the words of a bombastic prophet who's message of impending doom and destruction is intended to strike terror into the hearts of his hearers and call them to repentance.

The other is taken from one of Paul's "Pastoral" letters; a collection of letters intended to encourage and instruct a young church leader. Its tone might be better described as 'cautionary' rather than threatening.

They're both suggested by the lectionary, and while I sometimes scratch my head wondering how some passages were selected, on the assumption that there should be some common thread between them, I don't find myself scratching my head on this pairing.

They're both addressing, on some level, the root causes of conflict, oppression, and callous disregard for the welfare of the vulnerable.

Amos, in particular, is a thundering voice of God's wrath. His message is a steady torrent of warnings, threats, and condemnations of the behaviour of the people of Israel. He states in no uncertain terms that the people of the kingdom will be punished for their actions.

He's not a very subtle prophet, either. He's a simple man himself, a shepherd, and his message is direct and lacking in any sense of diplomatic tact. We only read a small part of his writings, but the book has nine chapters, and every one of them is full of criticisms and dire predictions of the catastrophe to come : that catastrophe being that the kingdom will be attacked, destroyed, and the people carried off into exile.

It's not a very popular message, as you might imagine. It's particularly unpopular with the ruling classes, and Amos is eventually kicked out of the kingdom under the charge of seditious behaviour, and sent back to Tekoa, in the southern kingdom of Judea, where he has roots as a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees.

It's an old piece of literature taken from an old book. Amos was probably writing around 750 BC, and one might be forgiven for asking what relevance it has for us today.

Conflicts that are nearly 3000 years old wouldn't seem to have much in common with the conflicts of today, and words of warning to a nation nearly 3000 years removed from

us wouldn't seem to have much direct application to our situation today either.

I suppose one of the obvious answers to that question is that the prophets of the Old Testament usually give us a picture of what is pleasing to God, and what is right behaviour, regardless of the time and place.

The major prophets, in particular, give us clear statements of what is acceptable to God, and most of you could probably readily quote from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah : passages that speak of compassionate behaviour placed in counterpoint to “strictly religious” behaviour.

In other words, a description of faithfulness to God that is expressed in treating others properly, as opposed to faithfulness that is expressed in observing religious forms and rituals.

That's one answer to the question of what relevance these passages have for us.

Another possible, and related, answer is one that has echoes for me of my experience when I started working with refugees in the late 80's and early 90's.

That's the late 80's and early 90's of the last millennium ... oh, how quickly we age ...

The question of relevance is rooted in the patterns of human behaviour that seem to play out in various times and places, regardless of the specifics of the day.

What I mean is that what we see as the underlying issues of justice in Amos' time are remarkably similar to the issues of today, and to the patterns of oppression throughout history in almost any region you choose to study.

Here's how one writer describes the circumstances behind the message of Amos :

First he explains some of the historical background to Amos' time period. It follows disruption and invasion from Syria and Assyria, but takes place in a time of relative stability and prosperity for the northern kingdom of Israel.

The writer, Stephen Winward, says this :

“In former times the peasants, the small-holders, the farmers, had been the strength of the nation. Now, in the changed circumstances following the upheavals and wars, they were at the mercy of the newly-rich. They had been dispossessed by the land-hungry and greedy upper classes. The small-holdings had been swallowed up in the large estates. There was a gulf between the rich and the poor. Nor was there any redress for the

oppressed in the law-courts. For the judges accepted bribes from the rich, and those without money were given no chance of a hearing.”

When I started working with refugees, some of my early contacts were with people from Central America : El Salvador, and Guatemala in particular. When I began informing myself about the various conflicts in the region, I learned that much of the strife had its roots in the history of small peasant farmers being forced off their traditional lands to make way for the plantations of huge multinationals.

People who had lived and worked on their parcels of land for generations had been evicted or murdered to allow the large landowners to swallow up their property, and the resulting situation coloured the political and social fabric of the region for decades.

Sounds not unlike Winward's description of things in the time of Amos, doesn't it?

But I wasn't struck by the parallels to Amos' context, or to Isaiah's context, or to any of the other Old Testament prophets who rail against these kinds of unjust practices.

I was struck by the parallels to what happened in Scotland during the mid 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During that time, the clan chieftains began to see themselves less and less as heads of an extended family, with reciprocal obligations that defined the relationship between them and the members of the clan. They began to see themselves more and more as landowners with nearly absolute power over the land and those inhabiting it.

The result of that shift in identity was that they became more and more convinced (quite rightly, by a purely commercial calculation) that it was more profitable for them to have sheep grazing on the land than to have people they saw as “tenant-farmers” who paid them a somewhat token rent.

So ... they proceeded to clear the land of the inconvenient population. The period is known as the “Highland Clearances”, and it's a particularly bitter blot on the history of the country. The people were pushed to the coasts and to the lowlands, and forced to try to survive on fishing or other trades. Many were then forced by the nature of the options open to them to “voluntarily” emigrate to North America and Australia.

Once in these new locales, these Scottish immigrants, like others from other nations, were now colonizers, settling on land to establish a foothold for the legitimization of the European claim of ownership. The indigenous inhabitants didn't really count in the overall commercial interests of the European rulers, other than through what they could produce in the way of furs, etc.

So the cycle repeats itself in this society and that; in this nation and that; in this time period and that.

We seem incapable of mastering the forces that drive us to attempt to wield power over each other in some form or another, and it doesn't seem to matter whether we are Christian, or Jew, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Sikh, or anything else.

The grasping after power, in the form of wealth, seems endemic to our race.

Paul certainly takes pains to warn Timothy about this danger.

I'm sure I've heard this passage from Paul's letter to Timothy misquoted often enough.

“Money is the root of all evil”

That's a damning declaration. It leaves little doubt that wealth, in and of itself, is something to be avoided; something that will inevitably lead to unhealthy choices and evil outcomes.

But, as I said, that is a misquote from the passage. Paul doesn't say that money is the root of all evil. He says that “The *love* of money is the root of all evil”. That at least acknowledges that we all need some form of wealth and power to survive. We need the means to provide for ourselves and for those we love.

At the same time, it recognizes that grasping after wealth and the power that comes with it is dangerous. It leads us into paths that risk blinding us to the effects of that grasping.

Some translations soften the passage a little more, and read “The love of money is *a* root of all evil” - the indefinite article instead of the definite article. In other words, the love of money is not the only thing from which evil grows, but only one of many temptations that threaten to twist our sense of right and wrong.

The version we read today, the NRSV, softens the verse even further and translates it rather as “The love of money is *a* root of *all kinds of evil*”.

So, not the only source of evil, and only one source of any number of evils.

It's still a damning declaration, but one that puts us on our guard against the worst excesses related to lusting after wealth and power, rather than putting us on our guard against having any form of wealth.

Fortunately for us, Paul has some advice for Timothy.

“Shun all this,” he tells him, meaning, I suppose, shun any temptation to be eager to be rich. Instead, he says, “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.”

Also fortunate for us, Paul also has some advice for Timothy to pass along to those who are already rich:

“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

The last time I brought a meditation, in mid-August, the theme was “Giving up possessions”. In that meditation I struggled a bit with the idea that Jesus sometimes calls his disciples to leave everything behind in order to follow him.

I asked for your help in understanding how live faithfully where wealth is concerned.

I claimed, somewhat tongue-in-cheek that :

Yes, I own a house, but the front door is open to anyone who needs a roof over their head;

Yes, I have money in the bank, but I try to use it wisely, as a steward of God;

Yes, I carry a smartphone with multiple bells and whistles (including the odd addictive game of some kind), but it's merely a tool that allows me to be more effective and responsive to the needs of those around me, because it means I'm more accessible;

Yes, I have a car, and camping equipment, and a bicycle, and tools, and a wardrobe full of clothes, and books galore, and a TV, and DVDs, and all kinds of comfortable furniture, and a computer, and musical instruments, and paintings, and gifts that I've received over the years ...

but I'm poor in spirit.

I also added to that list the fact that I have a fridge full of food; we have internet access; we have magazines that come to the door; we have tenants : people who pay us to share the space that is our home.

By the standards of much of the world, I said, we are rich young rulers.

And if I place myself in the context of this admonition of Paul's, I think I need to admit that I certainly fall under the description of one of "those who in the present age are rich".

And I think many of us in this circle fit that description. I grant that wealth is a relative thing : it can't really be measured in dollars and cents so much as in a standard of living.

But for those of us with some discretionary income (i.e. Income over and above what we need to ensure the absolute essentials of life), Paul has this to tell us :

"... do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share ..."

This, he says, is the good fight of the faith.