

Cathedral Matins 8th December 2019

Ps 80; Amos 7.1-9; Luke 1.5-17

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

A long time ago I went to Kenya; it was after I had completed my studies and just before I took up a “proper job” – nose to the grindstone. But although it was many years ago, there was an event so spectacular I can remember it as though it were yesterday. My 2 friends and I were going to Lake Naivasha – a large freshwater lake north-west of Nairobi, and we were excited at the prospect of seeing the beautiful landscape, the many water birds, the hippos submerged like tropical icebergs. We made an early start and set off in the car, leaving the city behind us and climbing the winding roads, higher and higher. At every bend in the road there was a new vista, each one more panoramic than the last. And then, suddenly, we saw it, stretching out below us like a vast, sunlight sea ... and spread wide along the shoreline, a candy-floss blanket of rippling pink feathers – a flock of flamingoes. We had prepared ourselves and we made the journey in anticipation, so that when we finally saw the lake, we embraced its wonder and its beauty.

God had planned the revelation of his true self, his Righteousness, from the beginning of creation. He had led his people up the long winding road, step by step, preparing them for the moment when his treasure, his great gift, would appear. But why? Why has he led his people, and why has he appeared to them?

The determination of God to have a people for himself and to keep them secure is a great mystery to us. The only explanation offered by the Bible is that *the Lord set his love upon you and chose you ... because the Lord loves you.* [Deut.7.7-8] His love is an outpouring of his nature.

Amos does not undertake to explain the mystery of God's purposes, but he offers us two insights into the will of God so that we may feel the security that is ours in it and the warmth of the love it expresses.

These insights are about the power of prayer, and the permanence of God's promises.

Giving us an insight into the mystery of prayer, Amos describes two visions which point to God's imminent judgment on his disobedient, covenant-breaking people. In the first vision, the second growth of crops, after the King's share had been taken to pay taxes, was about to be destroyed by locusts – and in the second vision, fire would consume the earth. Both catastrophes would lead to mass starvation – but destruction of his people was not God's plan. He would discipline them, but he would keep them secure. "Forgive, Lord - I beg you, stop!" cried Amos, "How can the tiny nation of Israel survive?" And the Lord relented. How the will of God can be affected by our prayers is a mystery, but in his desire for relationship with us, God calls us to pray, and he works with us and through us, so that we are engaged in the outworking of his purposes.

300 years after Amos, Malachi [Mal 4.5] prophesied the coming of John the Baptist, and over 700 years after Amos, the moment to fulfil that promise came. But when the word of the Angel Gabriel came to the aged Zechariah, it was not *the prophecy is now to be fulfilled* – but *your prayer has been heard*. [Luke 1.13] Years and years of faithful prayer by Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had come to coincide with God's will. Prayer is a means by which almighty God brings his determined purposes to pass. John the Baptist would fulfil his calling to go before the Lord, to turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people **prepared for the Lord**. [Luke 1.15 – 17 – fulfilment of Malachi 4.5-6] – a people prepared to receive his Righteousness. For Jeremiah had foretold that a Son of David would reign as king, and he will be called "the Lord is our Righteousness". [Jer 32.1-6]

But righteousness was in short supply in the days of Amos. Both the north and southern kingdoms were enjoying great prosperity and had reached new political and military heights. It was also a time of idolatry, extravagant luxury and indulgence, immorality, corruption of judicial procedures and oppression

of the poor. Israel at the time was politically secure and spiritually smug. About 40 years earlier, at the end of his ministry, Elisha had prophesied her restoration to a glory not known since the days of Solomon. The nation felt sure, therefore, that she was in God's good graces. But prosperity increased Israel's religious and moral corruption. *They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.* [Amos 2.6]

God's righteous anger burned at his people's exploitation of others.

He sent Amos with a message of social justice - *let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.* [Amos 5.24] Social justice is the indispensable expression of people who are **prepared for the Lord** - agreeing with God's values and sharing God's own heart of love for all his creation.

He sent Amos with a message of judgment, and another vision. This time the vision is of a plumb line. Israel is compared to a wall built true to plumb – what she should have been after he gave his laws – unique at the time – of caring for widows, orphans and strangers, leaving the edges of the fields unharvested, restoring land to the dispossessed, a weekly rest day for all people and animals, and so much more.

God's people had been "built", or nurtured, according to God's standards. He had made his covenant with them. He had given them his laws. He expected them to be true to those laws, but they were completely out of plumb when measured against God's standards.

And judgment is coming soon. In the Assyrian invasion Israel would lose everything she had.

But not quite everything. Amos goes on to share his insight into the permanence of God's promises. Beyond his immediate judgement, God had a glorious future for his people. God's judgment was part of his faithfulness to them – he would not abandon them or his chosen programme of redemption.

That redemption would be fulfilled in Jesus, heralded by John the Baptist who calls us to prepare in our hearts the way of the Lord – to make his paths straight – true to plumb. God's grace and God's love of justice cannot be

separated. Amos called his people to righteous living, and in Jesus God gives us the Lord who is our Righteousness.

The determination of God to have a people for himself and to keep them secure can only be because of his love for us, and nothing can ever separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

God's gift of eternal security means that the people of God, those who belong to him, are also kept by him through all adversity, and all uncertainty, and are finally brought by him into eternal and complete enjoyment of all the benefits and blessings which he purposed should be theirs.

Praise God for his generosity.

We stand to sing hymn number 7 (Hills of the north, rejoice!)