

Epiphany 3 2020 (Mattins)

The Prophet Amos, from whom we heard in our first lesson this morning, is quite remarkable for a number of reasons: one of which is that what he had to say to the people of Israel in the Seventh Century *BC* has much to say to us in the western world of the 21st Century *AD*.

Amos' prophetic career took place at a time of comparative material prosperity for Israel. But it was also a time of huge social divisions in society and a time when many were, at best, paying lip service *to* - and at worst *disregarding* - traditional religious values. So, what he has to say could easily apply to the way much of our world is today and indeed seems in harmony with the prophetic voices of our own time.

I was appalled by the bad taste of an article in *The Times* newspaper on Thursday, in which a columnist, said (albeit - sort of - half seriously) how she wanted to start a up a club for people who hate Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish climate change activist.

Greta Thunberg is a teenager, and at one level could be described as an unremarkable person. Amos was a shepherd and – as he also tells us – a dresser of sycamore trees. Again, at one level, an unremarkable person. And yet both *are* remarkable for their prophetic witness, over two thousand three hundred years apart from one another.

A distinctive feature of Israelite religion, and surely a distinctive feature of Christianity, *was* and *is* the interaction between one's relationship with God and one's relationship with other members of the community and society in general.

At the time of Amos, many – especially the materially wealthy – had chosen to ignore this aspect of their faith. As he declares to them earlier in his book (and this was the first prophecy to come down to us as a complete book): he declares ... "*For three transgressions and for four, I will not revoke the punishment: because they sell the righteous for silver, they trample the head of the poor into the dust, and push the afflicted out of the way*". He is addressing people whose prosperity has led them to become detached from a social conscience and concern for the marginalised.

This separation between religion and a concern for one's neighbour is also a serious issue for John in his first letter, from which we have also just heard as our second lesson this morning. Elsewhere in his Letters we hear that his community has become fractured. And so, he is at pains to point out that – again – a relationship with God means being a collaborator *with* God in healing wounds, in the church and in society. John's affection for his readers is clear. He calls them his "*dear children*" and longs to protect them from error and evil. But like all good parents, he is not averse to tough love. In words that sound almost like Amos, and in the following Chapter from the one read from this morning, John pulls no punches "*Whoever says, "I have come to know him" but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist*".

But to return to Amos, as we all know, there are places in the world today where "*the head of the poor IS being trampled into dust*" – literally and metaphorically - and it is a Christian's calling to collaborate with God in healing that wound in his world.

In his letter, John is concerning himself more with the wounds in the *Church*. But he is quite clear that our concern for unity in the church and our concern for the healing of divisions in society should flow quite naturally from one another.

At the time of Amos, these concerns flowed from the Law and from the covenant God had made with his people. For John and in our own time it flows from our spiritual fellowship with the Father, through Jesus Christ. We use the word "fellowship" a lot in the church, But fellowship is not superficial camaraderie, it is rooted in that creative relationship with God and therefore moves quite naturally into a desire for social justice. As so as a kind of "Mini Appendix" to this homily, I want to say this:

I believe that the credibility of our new government will rest, not on high speed railways or post Brexit trade deals, but rather how the powerful and influential will reach out and help those who have been left behind and how ways will be found of giving them self-respect, security and in many cases, jobs and homes. Put another way – "*lifting their heads out of the dust*".

It would be good to think that another Amos will not be necessary in the years ahead.

By Bruce Ruddock, Cathedral Chaplain