

Sermon for online service on 16 August 2020 – Amos part 1

Introduction and God's universal judgement - Amos 1:1 to 3:8

Good morning. Today we are starting the first of our series of 4 sermons on the book of Amos – one of the so-called 'minor prophets' whose book appears near the end of the Old Testament. I'd recommend that you read through the 9 chapters of Amos, at one sitting if you can, just to familiarise yourself with the text because there is a lot to take in.

So, to set the scene: Amos lived in the 8th century before Christ – therefore about 10,000 years ago - in the country of Judah in the middle east. He lived during the reigns of Uzziah king of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel whose reigns are recorded in the Bible in the second book of Kings.

I mentioned that Amos lived in Judah which was south of the country of Israel. After the death of King Solomon, the twelve tribes of Israel had divided their land into two countries – Israel in the north, comprising 10 of the tribes, and Judah in the south which was the home of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin with Jerusalem as its capital.

Amos wasn't a professional religious leader but was a farmer who tended crops and animals in his native town of Tekoa just south of Jerusalem. He was clearly a godly man, though, as God called him to prophesy, not directly to his own people in his own country, but to go north, just over the border into Israel, to proclaim his prophecies there at the sanctuary of Bethel.

The over-arching theme in Amos' prophecies is God's love of and calling for justice and righteousness in a world which showed little of either - as we will see as we examine today's readings. Probably the most famous verse from Amos can be found in chapter 5 verse 24 when he says 'But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream'. A river and a stream cut through the landscape and refresh the land all around them and it's a powerful image of the life-giving power of justice and righteousness.

So, let us turn to today's readings which came from chapter 1 verse 1 to chapter 3 verse 8.

The first two chapters are divided into oracles in which God castigates the people of the lands surrounding Israel. These are dire warnings of disasters to come on nations which had shown cruelty and disregard for the lives of their neighbouring countries, mainly Israel, whom they regarded as enemies. As we heard in our readings this morning these crimes were heinous and included dreadful acts of torture, the selling of defeated communities into slavery, indiscriminate killing, barbaric acts even against pregnant women, and the defilement and desecration of dead bodies which should have been treated with respect.

After raining God's judgement on the lands around Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab, Amos turns attention on his own country of Judah. Their undoing had been their rejection of God's laws, not keeping his decrees, and following false gods. They had gone their own way and turned their backs on God.

But just as Amos' Israelite listeners might have been growing complacent, we see in chapter 2 verse 6 that God's attention turns to them. Their crimes included selling the righteous for silver, selling the needy for the price of a pair of sandals, trampling the poor into the dust *and* denying justice to the oppressed. Despite their privileged position as God's people they had forgotten God's rescue of them from Egypt in the exodus and they had tried to silence the prophets who had pointed out the errors of their ways. Not only had they forgotten God but they didn't want to be reminded of him either.

They even used places of worship for sexual promiscuity and drunkenness. Amos was standing at such a place of worship – Bethel – a place which had been regarded by the Israelites as holy as it was at Bethel that their forefather Jacob encountered God in a dream when he saw a ladder reaching up into heaven. Jacob called the place 'Bethel' (in Hebrew 'Bet El') the 'House of God'. The people of Israel had turned this sacred place into a den of iniquity. I'm reminded of Jesus' indignation and anger when he cleansed the temple in Jerusalem of the money changers and sellers who were desecrating it and distracting and fleecing those who had genuinely come to worship.

The nations stood judged by God through Amos' prophecy and they would have to face their punishment. Not long after Amos prophesied the people of Israel

were taken into captivity by the Assyrians and the people of Judah later went into exile in Babylon. There they would have even more time to reflect on their wrongdoing, to repent and turn back to God, and eventually to return to their homeland.

While these prophecies were delivered thousand of years ago to people living in distant countries with cultures different from ours, the message of Amos is still relevant to us today as God calls us to justice and righteousness and to seek him and not evil.

We are called to speak up for the poor, the needy and the oppressed. We are called to stand up for justice. We are called to love God with all our hearts and to be holy as he is holy.

Who are the poor, the needy and the oppressed today? We see many of them suffering in other countries as the result of war, natural disasters, disease, malnutrition and, recently, a terrible accident. Their suffering has changed little if at all compared with the people of Amos' day 10,000 years ago. That's because the causes of their suffering are often the callousness of powerful people. Sadly, human nature has not changed.

Can we represent and support them through prayer and giving? Could we join one of the agencies, perhaps a Christian agency such as The Leprosy Mission, which gives practical support to the needy and marginalised?

How can we represent the needy in our own land? Could we support the work of Christians Against Poverty through prayer and giving in order to help people out of debt and into the glorious freedom of a relationship with Christ?

How can we work for justice and righteousness? We can certainly pray for it. In addition, might some of us consider a career change and retrain in order to practise law? Might some of our younger people, currently grappling with all the confusion in their schooling and exams brought on by the Covid 19 crisis, ask God where he is leading them, perhaps into training for a career in the law or in investigative journalism. Once there, they could represent those who have little or no voice or whose freedom of speech has been taken away?

Might some of us consider the oppression of loneliness, the difficulty in accessing care for elderly and disabled people, and the crushing weight of care

costs? I wonder if some of us might decide to become carers, or support the work of a care home, or train for medical or nursing careers? How about even investing money in purchasing and running a care home which is financially viable without being all about profit?

And how might we heed the call to holiness? Maybe we've lost sight of God and walked away from his laws and his ways. Perhaps we've even found other 'gods' to replace him. It's not too late to turn to God through Jesus and seek his mercy and grace.

And as for our churches seeking to be holy, surely prayer is the start and is the spur to the activities I mentioned above. We are living in a dark world where we face opposition from the evil one so there is even more reason for us to pray earnestly.

When we pray together, we seek to align our wills with God's. Let our churches, and each of us as individuals, make prayer a focus, asking God that he would guide us into justice, righteousness and holiness of living and 'let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream'. Amen.