

## Amos Chapter 5 verse 1 to chapter 6 verse 7

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Amos was a farmer-herdsman from an insignificant village in the Judean wilderness who was given a challenging message of judgement for the wealthy power brokers of the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos is unusual among the writing prophets because his messages focused almost exclusively on condemnation, and God chose the right man for the job. Amos was blunt, plainspoken, and unintimidated by important people with impressive titles.

In biblical times God chose to speak through handpicked leaders who would deliver his message to the people. The prophet could take no credit for what he or she said. Their duty was to say what God said, nothing more and nothing less.

The early to middle part of the eighth century was a heady time in the northern and southern kingdoms. Stability and prosperity reigned, and peace abounded. But as the rich got richer, the poor got poorer. In God's eyes, as expressed by Amos, this was a time of growing injustice and unrighteousness. It was also a time of idolatry, fancy living, immorality, and corruption in their leadership. Israel was politically secure and proud of their religious lifestyle. They were content in their immorality and comfortable in their sin. The Israelites showed the outward signs that they were God's people by holding religious festivals, offerings, and worship, but were unjust and exploited the poor. They were confident they had a good relationship with God. Amos arrived to tell them otherwise.

The central theme of the book of Amos is Justice. Justice is the standard by which the benefits and penalties of living in society are distributed. Throughout the Bible justice is an important concept. Justice is a central characteristic of the Kingdom of God. The people of God are called to seek justice (Micah 6:8)—not just for themselves but also for others.

God's justice is reflected in laws that protect the vulnerable. There are gleaning rights at times of harvest, the sabbath observance specifically includes servants, excessive interest is banned, and unpayable debts were to be regularly cancelled.

God's laws handed down to Moses were designed to create a just community. When the people of Israel chose to be God's people, they entered into a covenant agreement with God to keep His laws.

If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands...I will be your God and you will be my people

Leviticus 26 vs 3 & 12

The laws were meant to create a sound basis for living together in peace, justice, and righteousness. It was an agreement of obedience and faithfulness. The people of Israel were breaking that agreement. God's past punishments for unfaithfulness were forgotten, and His patience was at an end.

The statue of Lady Justice is often seen at law courts holding the scales of justice and a sword of authority and is usually blindfolded to represent impartiality. (Interestingly the one at the Old Bailey is not blindfolded as it was thought that by virtue of being female, she would be impartial!). But God is not impartial. He has his face turned towards those affected by injustice, the poor, the helpless, the downtrodden. This isn't because the poor are more virtuous because of their suffering, but

because they are the wronged, or sinned against. And because God loves justice, he takes up their cause.

God expects rulers and judges first and foremost as leaders to be just and right. To maintain the rights of the poor and needy, to speak for those who cannot articulate their suffering. The role of the prophets is to remind the leaders of this. God never intends to catch His people unaware, rather he used the prophets like Amos to give Israel fair warning that if they did not change their ways, they could expect God to act.

However, history is filled with unjust rulers and the subsequent suffering they cause. The prophet Amos reflects on the gross inequalities in society, the heavy taxation of the poor as well as the unjust judicial system. Israel's court sessions were held at the city gate, and Amos clearly lays out the structural injustice: 'They hate the one who reproves in the gate... I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who... take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate... Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate' (Amos 5:10-15). God sends Amos to speak truth to power.

It may have occurred to you as it did to me that many of the charges levelled at the leaders of the kingdoms of Israel could equally be levelled against modern day leaders. Corruption, twisting the truth, immorality, and a lack of concern for the poor and dispossessed.

The statistics show that globally today while the rich get richer the poor get poorer. If you took the wealth of the 8 richest people on the planet and combined it and then did the same for the poorest 3.5 billion, the two sums would be the same – 350 billion. Just 8 people own as much wealth as half the world's population. According to the equality trust, in the UK in 2018 the poorest fifth of society had only 8% of the total income, whereas the top fifth had 40%. The report *Who Pays the Price? Hunger: The Hidden Cost of Tax Injustice* highlighted the costs of corporate tax dodging as it robs poor countries of billions, they could invest in feeding their people. Food insecurity is often rooted in poverty and has long-term impacts on the ability of families, communities, and countries to develop and prosper. Today, more than 800 million people across the globe go to bed hungry every night. More than one quarter of Britain's children live in poverty.

Before the pandemic, things were bad but estimates from Save the Children suggest that as a result of Covid19, globally child poverty will soar by 100million, child mortality is set to increase dramatically, and education disparity will widen. Oxfam have warned that the impact of Covid19 could see the first rise in extreme global poverty in our lifetimes. However, in June 2016 the UK Department for International Development was merged with the Foreign Office prompting cross party fears that this merger may see more of the money designated to assist developing countries focused on UK national interests and less on poverty reduction. As such, this was a politically controversial move.

So, it made me wonder who are the modern-day prophets? Who is God sending to speak truth to power today? Whilst there are some high-profile Christians whose position gives them the opportunity to represent God's values in the places of power, the Church itself has a prophetic role to play. Peter quotes Joel in Acts 2:17

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."

Your sons and daughters will prophesy – we are all someone's son or daughter.

Advocating for justice isn't really optional either, Jeremiah in chapter 22 verse 15 and 16 speaking to the wicked king Jehoiakim about his good father King Josiah says;

“Does it make you a king

to have more and more cedar?

Did not your father have food and drink?

He did what was right and just,

so all went well with him.

16 He defended the cause of the poor and needy,

and so all went well.

Is that not what it means to know me?”

declares the Lord.

It might have been shocking for you to hear what God said to the Israelites in Amos' time about their worship. Amos challenged the Israelites by declaring: 'I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' (Amos 5:21-24, NIV.) Their worship was undermined by their behaviour towards the poor and vulnerable in their society. Amos made clear God's hatred of oppression and his anger at the abuse of power and its resultant impact on the poor and marginalised. God doesn't want our worship if we are not also involved in establishing righteousness, justice and mercy.

And there are examples of how the wider church has acted in this way. Hundreds of churches across the country took part in the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign, which called for the cancellation of debt from developing countries. The idea of the biblical Jubilee underpinned the campaign and ultimately helped ensure the cancellation of more than \$100 billion of debt from 35 developing countries.

The Make Poverty History campaign in 2005 brought together hundreds of organisations in the fight to end poverty. On 13 January 2006, 600 female clergy, along with Dawn French, delivered a Make Poverty History card to Tony Blair.

In 2013, the Enough Food for Everyone IF campaign also saw mass mobilisation ahead of a G8 summit, this time in Enniskillen. Motivated by their faith, thousands of UK churches got involved by hosting launch events, displaying banners outside their church, taking actions, and attending the rallies in London and Belfast.

Harwell and Chilton churches support world mission through designated mission partners both financially and through prayer. You can find out more on our website. We also partner with six other local churches and Christians Against Poverty to help local people find a lasting solution to debt and poverty and support the Didcot Emergency Foodbank providing short term relief by giving food to people in crisis.

Something I read preparing for this sermon really challenged me. In the forward to The Prophetic Church by Christian Aid, the Reverend Nigel Tween said:

“A visit to Uganda with a Christian Aid team made a lasting impression on me as I was confronted by the need of the poor for justice rather than charity. This realisation challenged both my theological thinking and my engagement with a broken world.”

We do charity well, and this is very important but it is also important to remember that the church today is not just a building where people go on a Sunday to sing hymns, but a prophetic body that should be challenging and speaking out to bring about God’s kingdom on Earth. We can carry out this prophetic work in many ways – through prayer, by writing to local politicians, signing petitions, forming community groups, protesting, contributing to debates, and more.

This does not necessarily mean being party political, but rather to be active in challenging areas of governance, economics, or society where they result in injustice.

The prophet Isaiah said

The Lord looked and was displeased

that there was no justice.

16 He saw that there was no one,

he was appalled that there was no one to intervene

With injustice as common as it was in Amos’ day and the poor marginalised the challenge for us to hate evil, love good and maintain justice in the courts is as strong as ever and this can be an act of worship.