

St. Mary the Virgin Edithburgh & St. James' Warooka

Pentecost 7 11 July 2010

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Amos 7:7-17; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

The passage we heard this weekend from the book of Amos comes in the middle of a series of visions. The vision in our passage is of the Lord placing a plumb line against the house of Israel. Israel is tested and found wanting.

It goes on to describe a conflict between Amaziah and Amos over the impact of his prophecy on the good order and security of Israel. In Amaziah's view his words are more than Israel can bear. They verge on treason, but, as he is a citizen of Judah and not Israel he is to be deported. He is commanded to leave the king's sanctuary at Bethel and return to Judah. Amos' retort is that Amaziah and the king have no jurisdiction in this case – for his authority comes from the Lord. He is not simply one of the court prophets – but has been specially sent by God. Then he proceeds to pronounce judgement on the house of Jeroboam.

This opens up a lot of questions. But this passage is not dealing directly with what it is that the people and the king are doing wrong. The failings of the people are laid out in different parts of this prophet's writings. Here though one clear challenge is the relationship between institution and gift or call.

Often people have used these words to make negative comments about the court prophets, saying amongst other things that they said whatever the King wanted to hear to sustain their livelihood. But that is a bit unfair. What we see hear is the clash between two equally committed groups of people. The court prophets were part of the clergy of the cult. They were charged with speaking God's word to the people. Sometimes they got it right, but the prophets' we have attested to the times when they got things wrong. Times when, perhaps, their commitment to the institutions of the faith overcame their judgement and awareness of what was happening around them.

Indeed, many people have asked the question as to whether Amos was one of these sanctuary prophets who simply saw things more clearly and said what he thought even though he placed himself at risk in doing so. An eighth century BCE whistleblower. This would have made him particularly dangerous, for he came from within. Isaiah also was probably either a priest or prophet within the royal sanctuary.

The challenge which Amos issues is a challenge to the authority of accepted institutions of church and state. Basically his message is that these institutions are not sacrosanct. The good order and security of the state is not above the call to fidelity to the Lord and justice in the treatment of the poor. The church is not simply an instrument of reassurance for state and society.

God unsettles both and judges them. The prophet must listen to God above both these – and sometimes against his or her own interests.

Amos challenges the view of faith as something that preserves the status quo, something which provides the cement which holds society and its institutions together. In fact it is something which can profoundly unsettle both of these. And Amos comes to proclaim just such a time.

How do we respond to this? To the idea that our faith does not simply reassure us, but can rattle the very institutions of which we are a part. To the idea that the institutions of church and society are not absolute, but relative – relative to the claim of God.

And in the end it leaves us with the biggest question of all. How do we discern when God is speaking against our comfort and self-interest? And how do we have the courage to be obedient to God?