

Pentecost 7C, 11 July, 2010

Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

The Plumb Line

The prophet Amos describes himself as a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees. He also seems to be a bit of a handyman “This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘a plumb line’” A plumb line, for the un-handy and uninitiated is a string with a weight on the end. When you hold the string at the top, the weight makes the line hang down straight. It shows us whether a surface is horizontal or vertical. A very important tool for a builder, essential in constructing walls, houses and the like, so that the surface ends up perfectly straight, vertically or horizontally. It’s the ancient version of a spirit level.

Amos knows his building tools, and he knows the society around him. So when the Lord says to him that he is measuring up Israel, exposing where they are out of line, Amos understands. All around him he could see the religious and social corruption of Israel: powerful people had become wealthier through their exploitation of the poor; heathen gods were worshipped. Amos’ prophetic voice rails out against this. He foresees that this idolatry, injustice, and infidelity will lead to Israel’s downfall.

Given what Amos was on about as a prophet, perhaps a “spirit level” is more apt than a plumb line. The plumb line represents an obvious symbol of accountability and righteous behaviour – a true measure of the Spirit at work in God’s people. It signals a standard against which the behaviour and attitudes of God’s people are measured. The plumb line found Israel crooked –a nation failing to live straight, according to the laws of Moses.

And from this ancient image, there’s a question that carries over for us, too: what is the behaviour expected of us, who profess to follow Jesus Christ? What is our plumb line?

This week, I heard news of another priest losing his job because of his sexual misconduct. I feel an almost overwhelming sorrow when I hear of fellow priests, or indeed any Christians, falling out of line – falling out of the plumb line not just set for priests, but for all professing Christians. For a priest, however, the bar isn’t so much as set high or higher than what’s expected of all Christians, but we as priests more publically portray the life of Christ in the way we live. For many people – inside and outside the Church - a priest’s way of life acts as a plumb line, the visible measure of the life of Christ. But it’s not just priests -as so many of you have experienced, people who live their lives outside of the Church, or who are sceptical of religion, watch the behaviour of Christians carefully, all too ready to find hypocrisy.

And there is a crisis of morality and integrity in the church. Reports of child sexual abuse and the Church’s lack of transparency and its failure to protect the vulnerable are constantly in the news. Sexual misconduct of church leaders—defined in our Anglican Code of Conduct for clergy and church workers as sexual relations outside of marriage – is not uncommon. The world might be attuned to a casualness in sexual relations, but God’s call for Christians to love our neighbour as ourselves excludes anything other than the highest of respect, fidelity and interpersonal commitment.

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And the world watches, with two types of sad comment. One is –‘What hypocrisy! If that’s how the leaders of the church behave, how can I trust; how can I believe?’. The other sort of comment is ‘Everyone else does it. The church is being too puritanical.’

I am very humbly aware, too, that “there but for the grace of God go I” – that in our humanity, faced with the complexity of our innermost needs and the seductions of the world’s values, any of us are susceptible to falling. And if we do fall, what does the Lord require? The rule of Christ in our lives calls us to come clean, make no excuses or diversions, and to own our wrongdoings –our sins – confessing these and repenting. And so we receive forgiveness, whilst still facing the consequences of our actions; hearing the words of Christ as he so often coupled with his healings: “go and sin no more”.

There are two particular challenges for us here. The first challenge is the reality that too often fault lines slip into our lives, and go unnoticed or ignored. We get out of plumb and don’t see it. That’s pretty easy to do if we take the world’s standards as our plumb line. The world has a different set of standards – a different plumb line – to what God asks of Christians. Just because something is the norm in the world, does not make it OK for Christians. As long as we compare ourselves to what the world does instead of what God, what Christ requires, we just won’t notice if the plumb line is crooked. We just won’t notice that we’re off track as far as God’s desire for our lives go. It also means to be vigilant that we don’t automatically ascribe an over-zealous or overly strict code of behaviour to the Scriptures – that, too, can be just as much of a fault line and out of plumb.

The second challenge is understanding what God does require of us; and to know that, is to be steeped in the Scriptures. Christians are guided by Scripture, backed by the tradition of the church and reason. That’s our plumb line. Sometimes – especially in the broad picture – that’s not too difficult. Take what the prophet Micah says, not long after Amos’ time: “He has told you, O mortal what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” (*Micah 6:8*) That’s clear cut – but there’s a problem if we try to redefine what is meant, according to the values of a society who doesn’t honour God –like our twenty-first Australian, Western society. That way we’ll miss what God himself is asking of us.

The Letter to the Colossians asks: Will you hold fast to the true word of the Gospel, or will you be seduced by religious fads and philosophical deceits? The standard –the plumb line measure – is the leading of lives worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work. The way to the standard – being filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding; enabled by God. And how do we become filled that knowledge? Through the work, the empowering, of the Holy Spirit, and the feeding and nourishment of the Scriptures.

And take today’s Gospel: a very clear directive about what is required of Christians, THE plank, THE ultimate plumb line of Christian living: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” asks the God-loving specialist in Hebrew religious law; Jesus pushes him to his answer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” And who is that neighbour? The one who shows mercy is the only

response. Jesus' story –using the example of a despised Samaritan - brings home that it may well be our most feared enemies or outsiders.

Notice how this plumb line starts with our inner selves and finishes with our social responsibilities. The visible measure of our heart-held beliefs is how we treat all others. In this NAIDOC week, there's an invitation here to measure ourselves in terms of how we think of and treat our indigenous neighbours; how we work against the disadvantage suffered by them.

Of course it can be hard to discern sometimes what the Scriptures actually say and what they require of us. Sometimes we need to pick our way through difficult interpretations and culturally-bound contexts. Good, continuing Bible study and good guidance in reading the Scriptures, as well as regular, rhythmic and humble prayer for guidance, is critical for right Christian understanding and living. It's critical to keep the Scriptures in front of us, to be deeply grounded in them, so that they are our standard and we're not seduced by the world's idea of what is good and acceptable.

To finish, with an appeal from St Paul: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God –what is good and acceptable and perfect.” [*Romans 12:1-2*]

And for our reflection: what is the plumb-line that you follow for your life? What does it reveal about you and about your commitment to Christ?