

Pentecost 8. 18th July, 2010.

Amos 8:1-12

Let Justice Roll Down

“Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land....”

Wouldn't that be a fabulous way to start an election campaign? Any election campaign, regardless of who has been the governing party. Regardless of who wants to be in government. No doubt we'd prick up our ears, or turn off the TV, ready to be besieged with an electionese or journalistic-driven stoush.

I wonder, though, whether in this day and age, would we really hear words like those, as words that actually meant something; as words that were relevant and prophetic? Do we live in very cosy, self-contained worlds that are large enough only to deal with the problems of our own everyday lives? I know I have to constantly challenge myself about that. Are we able to see further, to see the darker and more hidden corners of disadvantage in Australian life? And then, what might we see and take as our responsibility?

This is your election sermon. It's in no way party political. But our Scriptures do have something to say about what God desires for his creation; and so, the Scriptures talk about the sorts of things we should think about as we exercise our rights to vote and participate in the future of this nation. Let's try to discern what God might be saying to us; especially as we put our own nation under the microscope in the lead up to the looming elections.

What might we hear from the prophet Amos, who took Israel to task about the conditions of life in the eighth century before Christ? What would the plumb-line of God's love and justice and mercy look like, held up to Australian life? Amos certainly found Israel's political and religious institutions wanting. Seriously wanting. And Amos preached doom and destruction for Israel. Shape up, says the Lord, or rue the consequences of your unethical and God-denying activities.

If you thought Amos only had meaning for his day and age, listen to how my favourite contemporary Biblical translator, Nathan Nettleton, puts today's reading:

“Listen to me, you who wipe your feet on those in need;
you who destroy the poor for your own gain.
 You resent religious holidays
because they interrupt your wheeling and dealing;
 you demand twenty-four hour, seven-day trading
so that you can rip people off without ceasing.
 Your advertising is all deceit and delusion;
you rig the odds and the interest rates.

You lure the poor into crippling debt
until you own them — body and soul —
 and then charge them again for owing you money.”

It could easily be today, couldn't it? A national life shot through with corruption: exploitation of the weak, failure in righteousness, ignoring God's ways, oppression of the poor.

The factors at work in Amos' world have been repeated in substance in many places at many times - national military aggression, territorial expansion, and a prosperity built on that, but resulting in gross inequities between the urban elites and the poor. There was wide-scale malpractice of debt and credit (echoes of our global financial crisis), with the connivance of governing and religious authorities, and so wealthy landowners amassed capital and estates at the expense of small farmers. These landowners and money lenders would manipulate the smallest debts to kick farmers off their hereditary landholdings. On top of all of this, religious leaders pronounced God's blessings on it all.

Amos looked on all of this and called it for what it was - unethical, corrupt and against God's laws. It violated that special covenant relationship between God and Israel, where the vulnerable and disadvantaged were to be cared for; where justice and mercy were supposed to be the foundations of social life.

Amos is just the first of many prophets to raise a voice calling people back to the heart of the faith they claim. So this is not just about what Amos said; nor about the particular conditions of his time. What he saw, was what other later prophets saw, and what has been seen and experienced in very similar ways throughout the centuries. To this day. Abuse of power; abuse of privilege; abuse of political and spiritual authority.

What would Amos see if it was the Australian nation he was looking at? Alongside the opportunities and goodness of this country, he could well see the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer; a widening gap between well resourced urban life and rural poverty, and a further gap to indigenous communities. What would he make of our banking practices and profits, at governments earning income from gambling, and a nation that appears to worship the getting of possessions, profit making, and the cult of celebrities? And perhaps best not to mention refugees, the homeless, unemployment, abandoned elderly people and abuse of the young and vulnerable. Would we hear him say to us “*Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land*”?

What would Jesus see?

Remember Mary's song - the Magnificat? With the coming of the Lord, the mighty would be brought low, the rich sent away empty, the poor exalted, the hungry satisfied. Jesus identified with the people on the margins of

society - the weak, the outcast, the alien, the downtrodden. In today's terms, we could say the refugees, the chronically unemployed, anyone disadvantaged and discriminated against because of their poverty, their disabilities, mental illness, their lack of education, their inability to access resources. And so on. These are the defenceless people, the powerless, the voiceless ones at the bottom of the social structure. And do take note, there's not a word from Christ about whether there are "deserving or undeserving poor"; but plenty about the responsibilities of the privileged. Jesus treated the issue of how we deal with wealth and privilege as a deeply spiritual matter, and maintained that our true values and priorities are shown in our relationship to the poor and to material goods.

Like Jesus, the apostles taught that one could not profess love for God while ignoring the needs of hungry neighbours. And what the Bible condemned then, is still condemned. Everything the Scriptures say about mercy and justice and the special concern for the poor applies directly to us as affluent Australians.

When we dig into Amos; when we look closely at the life of Christ and his message, we see God caring not just about the private lives of individual people, but about public life, the life of a nation. His call to truth, integrity, mercy and justice goes beyond the personal, to the moral actions of institutional systems -to corporate responsibility, to all manifestations and organisation of public life. Personal piety is important to God, but social justice is perhaps even more so.

OK - back to the elections. The question each of us as followers of Jesus must address is -how do we bring our faith into play in this? This is not about the Church lobbying politicians, although there is a role for that at a different level. This is not about the church getting in on the political agenda. It's not about there being any one political party or batch of policies that are closer to the Christian ethic than any other.

It is, however, about each of us prayerfully thinking through the issues -not in terms of how policies may advantage us individually in our own circumstances, but in how and whether justice and mercy may be brought to bear for the disadvantaged people in our society; even if it costs us, individually. That's the invitation of Christ for all of our lives, everyday.

In the end, really, for Christians, political elections are never about party politics. They are, however, about shining the light of Christ upon every issue and every promise, and seeking to see through his eyes, and seeking his way of mercy and justice.

May the Lord guide us all in our deliberations over these next five weeks. Amen.

"Franciscan Blessing"

May God bless you with discomfort,
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
so that you may live with integrity deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger,
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears,
to shed for those who suffer from pain,
rejection, starvation, and war,
so that you may reach out your hand
to comfort them and turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness,
to believe that you can make a difference in this world,
so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

And the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be upon you and
remain with you always. **Amen.**