

In the name of God, and of God's Son, and of God's Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday, our Lectionary readings had us considering prophets. We looked at the ways communities had viewed prophets through the ages: as visionaries, as people with a unique ear open to God's speech, as healers, and as - maybe - just a little crazy. We looked at Jesus returning to his hometown, and how challenged and threatened the people who had known Jesus from childhood might have felt when they realised someone they thought was ordinary, someone they thought they knew, someone like them could be called by God to be a prophet. This Sunday, our Lectionary continues to look at prophets, and how their faithfulness to the call of God makes them, shall we say, less than popular.

I love the backstory of Amos. Most of the prophets speak in times of desperation, need, and exile. Amos hears the call to prophetic ministry, not in a time of turmoil and hardship, but in a time of peace and prosperity. But this time of plenty is not being shared by all. The Hebrew people are living in shocking inequality. A small class of elites are enjoying the wealth while the majority of people are barely hanging on. The elites get to eat things like good, juicy figs; while people like Amos eat the inferior fruit of the

sycamore tree, which they dress by putting small cuts into so the fruit will ripen on the tree more quickly. People like Amos are constantly facing hunger, and must scratch out every bit of food from the wild places they can; while those in the court of the king are feasting without thought to anyone else. God sees this inequality, this hunger in the midst of prosperity; and God decides that God needs a prophet to address it.

God calls the people to meet a higher, more equitable standard of living together. God gives the metaphor of a plumb line, a simple tool used to make sure that things are even, balanced, level, rather than tipped in favor of one side over the other. Amos takes this message to those who have reaped prosperity from the hungry labour of others. It does not make Amos very welcome. Amos pretty much upsets everyone who thinks that they are entitled to the comfort they possess, and deserve to have more than those people who lack. These elites living in splendour have told themselves they've done the right things to get what they have and they deserve it; those people who lack an easy life, like Amos, must have brought their misfortune on themselves. What on earth could the wealthy owe to people like Amos?

Amos says that God sees things differently. God wants to hold the people to a measure where things are balanced, where, as Paul said, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” It’s a message that gets Amos shown the door at the court of king Jeroboam.

In our Gospel today, we see what has become of John the Baptist, who had a similar message to Amos. John had called the people to repent, to return to a life with God at its center, rather than wealth and power. The one who has two cloaks should give to the one who has none, John tells them; if you collect taxes, collect no more than is owed, don’t demand extra to keep for yourselves. The king in John’s day, king Herod, knew that John was “a righteous and holy man”; and that made Herod fearful of John. He liked to listen to John, but didn’t want John’s message to upset his comfortable life. I wonder if the business with Herodias, Herod’s wife, was just a convenient excuse for king Herod to imprison and silence John; to contain the truth with which he was being confronted. Like Amos, John was bringing a message that challenged the entire social order that upheld Herod and kept Herod in a place of wealth and power, and Herod wanted to get him and his message out of the way.

Herod knew, I think, that if John's message came from God there was no standing against it. God's call to a righteousness in which all could be fed and housed, where all had the opportunity to flourish was a threat in Amos' day and in John the Baptist's day, and it still is today. God's call to re-balance the social order and make the common good, the good of all creation central to our lives, rather than living for self and the power and wealth one could accumulate is a threat to much of what is familiar to us. It is a threat to the few who unjustly hold wealth and status and power; and it is a threat for those who covet such wealth and status and power and have shaped their lives with the desire to attain it, disregarding the command to love neighbour as self.

God has given us a metaphorical plumb line, a simple tool for recalling our communities to righteousness, in the words of the prophets. God calls us to the prophetic work of looking around us, and seeing where inequality leaves some buried in riches and others labouring to exhaustion to scratch out what little living they can. It is not a popular message, but it is a righteous one. And fulfilling it will probably cost even us some of the comfort we afford ourselves. But if we are to fulfill God's vision for us as a

human family, this work of re-balancing, of meeting the needs of all so that everyone can sit in their own house and under their own vine in peace - or in our modern day, to have clean air, clean water, healthy food, health care, and safe housing - it is a prophetic call we must answer, and a good work we must do. Amen.