

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 15 May - Easter 3 (Year A)
Amos 5.8-15, 18-24; I Peter 1.17-23

I always find looking at objects from the distant past both humbling and inspiring. Last month I went to the opening of the new exhibition in the Ashmolean of treasures from a recently excavated tomb from the ancient capital of Macedonia, dating to the period leading up to Alexander the Great. Among the treasures were gold ornaments of such delicacy, grace and beauty, and silver vessels so finely wrought, that all my assumptions about how primitive and violent life in Greece was more than 2,500 years ago had to be put aside. Here were human beings with a sophisticated artistic vision and with skills of craftsmanship that would challenge their modern counterparts. I have so often felt on such occasions that the centuries fall away, a sense that these were human beings just like us; that the extraordinary scientific and technological advances we have made do not make us any different from them in terms of their hopes and fears, the problems they faced, the creative gifts they possessed.

We need to use our imaginations to bridge the gap between past and present when we read the ancient literature of the Bible. The world of Amos is very remote to us - two hundred years before the birth of the Buddha and Confucius, a century or so before the beginnings of the Macedonian Empire. Yet it is dotted with familiar names and places. We may be hazy about where Moab and Edom were (roughly, modern Jordan), yet we are acutely aware of Damascus and Gaza, to which the first of his prophecies are addressed, in the continuing struggles for peace and justice in the Middle East at this moment of what is already being termed the Arab Spring. The political conflicts and wars of this biblical world continue into modern times. I recall visiting Megiddo, which gives its name to Armageddon, a strategic hill which commands the vale of Jezreel, fought over countless times over the millennia, as it was again during the First World War and the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. The narrow strip of land occupied by Palestine and Israel was one of the major trade routes of the ancient world, because it was the land bridge between Europe, Asia and Africa, and control of it brought power and wealth.

But understanding the geopolitics of the area does not of itself liberate Amos for us from that remote past so that he can speak to us and to our world. For that you have to know the context in which he was operating, as Richard set it out for us last week. Perhaps the recent election result in Scotland will make us more sensitive to it. The united kingdom David and Solomon ruled split in the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam. I Kings records how the northerners - Israel - had come to the king in Judah, the south, complaining that Solomon's taxation policy had been punitive, so what was he going to do about it? Rehoboam consulted his ministers. The older ones

advised him to make concessions. But the younger ones, with whom Rehoboam had grown up, persuaded him to adopt a hardline response: 'My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions' (I Kings 12.14). There was never a united kingdom again. When I read that, I can't help thinking of the run-up to the Iraq war. So many of those with knowledge and past experience of the Middle East advised against it. But the Bushes and Blairs of this world were not interested in what they had to say. Scorpions for Rehoboam; shock and awe for them.

Amos may have been an agricultural worker but boy could he write. I love the way Amos begins with a series of attacks on all the foreign nations of his day. I can just imagine his listeners being lulled into a false sense of security and feeling smug and superior. Yes, yes, they deserve everything that's coming their way. Amos, you're great. Give us more. He does, but not as they expect. Suddenly, in the second chapter, he turns his fire on Judah; on them. All the prophecies against foreigners were simply a prelude, scene-setting before he reaches his real target. It's a powerful technique. It reminds me of Nathan the prophet, who came to see David after David had seduced Bathsheba and had had her husband killed. Nathan tells David a touching story about a rich man who stole a poor man's ewe-lamb to entertain a visitor, rather than use one of his own extensive flocks. David is incensed and threatens dire punishment to offender. And Nathan turns on David and says: 'You are the man!'. Rarely has self-righteousness been so effectively exposed.

Amos's broadside against his own people contains two elements in chapters 5-6, which I've been asked to concentrate on: his attack on religious observance divorced from social justice, and his take on the Day of the Lord. He sees, as we so often see, that vested interests do not want to hear the truth spoken. They do not like to be told that it is immoral for a few people to earn hundreds of times more than those at the bottom of the pile, that it destabilises society; and, one might add, for those same few to support the reduction of pension benefits for the many while they will never have any such worries. Amos sees institutionalised injustice all around him: bribery, favouritism and extortion, so that those who have done very nicely out of the system can do even better and live in luxury at the expense of the needy. 'Seek good and not evil [...] and establish justice in the gate', he cries out. As you may know, the gateway to a village or town was the place where the elders or judges would sit to receive petitions and hear complaints. The recent controversy about super-injunctions has shown us only too clearly that if you are rich and famous you appear to have rights to privacy which others do not. Impartial justice is one of the foundations of society, and without it society will degenerate and collapse.

It is not that the consumerism of this period of peace and prosperity in Israel's history has replaced religion. Those who have profited most from it love their

religion. They are positively looking forward to the day when God will finally intervene - the Day of the Lord - and reward them for their piety, rather like those now who are awaiting the Rapture and rub their hands in glee at the thought that they will be caught up into the heavens while so many others are consigned to hellfire. Amos is not a comfortable prophet for such people. The Day of the Lord is darkness, not light. Imagine you are fleeing from a lion and there, right in your path, is a bear. Imagine you manage to escape them both and reach the safety of home, only to find as you rest you hand against the wall that a snake bites you. That is what the Day of the Lord is like for those whose religion is all about self and is divorced from the demands of justice. So Amos has God utterly reject all their religious festivals and assemblies, offerings and music; instead, he cries, 'let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'.

Is the Church still speaking with this prophetic voice? In many places it is: think of Christian Aid and 'Make Poverty History'. In others, it isn't: think of the Ugandan churches' encouragement of the persecution of gay people and the violence against them which has ensued. But we should remember that most biblical prophets were ignored. Amos was told to shut up. Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern. They said what the rich and powerful did not want to hear. But it never stopped them, and however tiny or ineffective its prophetic voice may be, the Church in all its parts must actively seek justice, resist evil, be a tireless advocate for the underdog.

Let me, therefore, end with a recent example; one which engages with the greed of our times, is at one level a failure, and at another a prophetic parable. Last Friday week the Annual General Meeting of Goldman Sachs took place. Goldman Sachs is famous for the huge bonuses it pays its already rich executives. Sister Nora Nash, the corporate responsibility director for the Sisters of St Francis of Philadelphia, tabled a resolution requiring the Board of Goldman Sachs to judge whether the pay of its top five executives (almost £70m for 2010) was excessive. She said: 'Executives have amassed untold wealth while a billion people suffer from poverty and food insecurity'. Another religious group, the Interfaith Centre on Corporate Responsibility, also turned up to protest about these awards. Sister Nora's resolution only won 4% of the votes, no doubt because a small number of major investors own virtually all the shares. But the Goldman Sachs pay plan only gained 73% of votes, which was considerably lower than usual.

Sister Nora's resolution may have received a derisory number of votes, but she was there. The voice of Amos was heard, and, I believe, the light of Christ shone from a brief moment in the moral darkness. In a society like ours, where everything seems governed by spin and sound-bites and short-term political gain, it can be very hard for the truth to be heard. But Christ's followers must never shy away from speaking it,

even if it means courting unpopularity and ridicule. Amos was an ordinary working man who saw the truth more clearly than those who thought they were in control of events. He was right and they were not. Israel, the northern kingdom, did not survive. It disappeared into the mists of history, leaving the question of what happened to its ten lost tribes to the speculations of cranks and fantasists.