

Sermon Evensong Lent 2 2023

For many Christians, even for many lifelong, church-attending Christians, there are parts of the bible that remain strange to us, parts that are rarely read and even less understood. We should be glad, then, that the traditional Anglican way of reading the bible at the offices of morning and evening prayer exposes us to the whole scope of Christian scripture. In that yearly cycle, nothing is left out, nothing is censored, nothing is considered irrelevant. All of it is proposed for us to at least be exposed to. But without presuming, I dare say that that custom of reading the bible would be unusual to most of us here tonight.

For sure, the attempt to read the whole bible over the course of the year does make for a fairly heavy diet of a lot of words in an attempt just to plough through it all. The alternative risk, of course, is that we consider the bible too weighty for mere mortals and so we don't bother with a sustained and systematic reading at all. The sad fact is that most Anglicans, even fairly churchy ones, are mostly illiterate about significant parts of the bible.

I suspect that for many of us here tonight the first lesson from the Book of Amos will be one such part. If we know anything at all we will know Amos is one of the 'minor prophets', one of those 12 little books after the major prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The Book of Amos is only 9 chapters long. And the author is most likely the earliest of the classical prophets, writing sometime in the 8th century BC. And being the earliest he really set the tone for how the whole biblical prophetic tradition unfolded. In other words, he was a trailblazer. However, it is not a book we ordinarily turn to for inspiration or guidance. It is not a book that features heavily in our lectionary readings at mass. In fact, at the top of my head, I cannot think where in the liturgical year he turns up at all. Amos, I suspect for most of us, is unknown territory.

Still, here it is tonight, on this second Sunday of Lent. And so we are reminded of another important principle: that the reason we continue to hold the bible to be sacred scripture is that we insist these ancient texts *continue* to speak to us, that in some way God through these documents has something to say to us. We affirm that they are, in every sense timeless, even the strange and unfamiliar bits. They transcend the times and places from which they arose so to speak to men and women of every age and every place.

In this little book, we are told Amos was a herdsman and ‘a dresser of sycamore trees’. In other words, he was a rural fellow, a farmer. He was not part of the religious or political elite. There was a ‘prophetic class’, if you like, in ancient Israel. But they didn’t do a very good job and Amos was not part of them. But it was precisely this that gave him a unique perspective. He was from the southern tribe of Judah looking up to what was happening to the northern tribes of Israel and was disturbed by what he noticed.

Amos looked out on this wider context - as an outsider onto his near neighbours - and he saw things no one else saw. He heard things no one else could hear. And he let that bigger picture be interpreted by the covenant God had established with his people. And Amos saw abandonment of the covenant. He saw infidelity to the covenant. He saw injustice as a result. And he recognized that there must be consequences for this. The bad decisions of the people and corrupt dealings of the leadership he reckoned God could not continue to overlook. God’s people cannot defy God without trouble sooner or later becoming apparent. For Amos, he saw that this trouble would be sooner rather than later. And he could discern the shape and the look of what that would be.

The stern words of the prophet we have heard tonight are put to us in this early part of Lent because we too need to hear them! We need to hear them because we too need to understand that there are consequences for going astray. Of course, there is always the hope of rescue, of mercy, of forgiveness. God is always inviting his people to return to him. Yet it remains, that even with a heart of penitence, even with humility and contrition, we are *scarred* by our disobedience. Even if our missteps do not determine our story, they become part of our story. Peter in the Gospel reading tonight cannot reverse his denial. The damage is done. The words cannot be returned. Yes, for Peter, restoration will come, but the memory remains. Put your hand in the fire, it will be burnt. Jump off the roof of a building, you will break your leg. The burn may heal and you might walk with a limp. But the boundaries, the restrictions are there to protect us. Amos recognised this. Wander from God, abandon his ways, and we’ll get hurt! We hear tonight: *As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who live in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed.* In other words, end up in the mouth of the lion and there will not be much left of you to rescue! Put our hope in something other than God there will only be fragments left. Yes, God can work with that. But the good order he has established is so that we might flourish and be spared unnecessary hurt. Amen.