

Sermon on Amos

The Plumb Line

The voice of the prophets never makes us feel comfortable.

Prophets are by nature difficult.

They provoke.

They upset the ease with which we get on good terms with ourselves and with God.

But it takes more than just being provocative.

The prophet must speak the truth.

The word of the Lord.

Not just any old word.

No tweet, no facebook post, no latest barb in the culture wars which will disappear before the sun is up tomorrow.

The prophet's word comes from a deeper place, a more lasting place.

From the searing fire of God's own heart.

The prophet listens and watches for God.

And then, when the time is ripe, when the call is clear, unleashes the word into the world.

And it breaks everything open.

It opens up the way of God in the wilderness, the stream in the desert, even when that way is uncomfortable for those receiving the prophet's message.

It never makes them popular figures.

Though in time, the truth of their message vindicates, it endures where all else fades away.

Rome did away with Jesus, or so it thought.

But 400 years later history did away with Rome.

And here we are today still gathering in Jesus' name and power.

The Bible is awash with surprising and telling images.

Pretty well every corner of life is drawn upon in order for the biblical writers to make their point.

There are legal images, agricultural, economic, sporting, musical, they cover the whole gambit of human experience.

And in Amos 7 we have the industrial image of the plumb line.

All the builders in the congregation cheer.

This is what the Lord showed me, Amos says: *'The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand... I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel. I will spare them no longer.'*

The plumb line, of course, helped the builder make the wall straight.

Firm. Solid. Secure. True.

It gave the true guide.

The trustworthy measure.

It showed up any bad workmanship, any crooked angles, any dodgy lines.

The people of Israel had become crooked.

Used to the good life.

Indifferent to the call of God.

Indifferent to the vision of God for the common good of all.

Given over to idols and indolence.

Amos preached at a time of unprecedented prosperity in both the northern and the southern kingdoms.

With prosperity came social inequality.

The rich were getting richer.

The poor were suffering.

The prosperity was not benefitting all.

The people of God were forgetting the holy vision laid upon them to be a loving society, to promote a compassionate world, to be a blessing to the nations, a sign of God's justice and peace, where swords were beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks.

Where love and justice reigned for all.

Amos preaches to call them back.

To remind them of who they really are.

To shock them out of their complacency.

Now most of the time greater prosperity was seen as a sign of God's favour.

See how God is blessing us, we must be doing something right.

It's not dissimilar to some prosperity preaching you hear around the world today.

Look at how God is blessing us.

I went to a Christian conference once where the presenter was quizzed about prosperity teaching and he said, that rich people and poor alike could experience suffering.

I thought that was a reasonable response in the situation.

Then he went on to say, 'I'd just rather suffer in a jaguar.'

Amos takes a different view.

He sees wealth and prosperity as a threat to Israel's vocation.

A blinding force to their true purpose.

Prophets were normally seen as trouble makers, but even more so when they preached a message of God's judgement during prosperous times.

They could be easily dismissed.

Not Amos.

What do you see Amos?

He is watching eagerly.

'Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel.'

God was going to straighten up the crooked wall.

Make it strong again. True.

The good times quickly disappeared of course.

In only a matter of 3 decades the Assyrians swept in and destroyed the Northern Kingdom completely, and drew right up to the gates of Jerusalem itself.

All that wealth and prosperity went.

What were the people left with then?

Nothing but their covenant relationship with God.

They had put their hope in the wrong thing. God was now redressing the error, bringing the crooked wall back to plumb.

All these beautiful buildings will be destroyed Jesus tells the incredulous disciples, staring at the Temple, not one stone will be left on another.

If God set down his plumb line into our midst, would our walls be found wanting?

Personally, corporately, societally?

If Amos walked among us today, what kind of message might he send?

What would he see?

Perhaps his mid 8th Century BC context of relative calm and comfort might not have been that different to our own?

If the GFC taught us anything, it was surely how alluring and problematic wealth and prosperity can be to the cause of faithful living.

Prosperity becomes an end in itself... just a little bit more than you... when really we should see what we have as means by which to create a just world.

To see that everyone is fed and clothed and housed.

What we think we own, we actually don't.

Like our very lives, our possessions belong to God.

So our first question should always be not, what would my preference be?

But God's?

And we might be reminded that the plumb line is a line of justice and hope for all, not just the few.

That in fact it is in the first place, for those who have little in this world, rather than those who have much.

There's a great scene in the *West Wing*, one of my favourite TV shows about the fictional president Jed Bartlet and his administration.

One of his staffers comes to him and sheepishly admits that he's pulled some strings he shouldn't have to get a homeless Vietnam veteran a military funeral.

So that at least in death, if not in life he could have some dignity.

The President gently but firmly scolds him for this misuse of Presidential power, and finishes by saying, 'If we start pulling strings like this, don't you think every homeless vet will start coming out of the woodwork?'

The staffer stands up straight and with an unflinching stare replies, 'One can only hope sir.'

The President, slightly taken aback at this rebuke from a subordinate, stops for a moment, smiles, then gently squeezes the staffer on the arm as if to say... that's right.

One can only hope.

That's the plumb line.

Hope, justice, and dignity for all.

But, of course, because we are sinful and selfish, we continue to struggle with this holy calling.

Israel's failure to truly be the people of God faithfully is mirrored in our own.

'One can only hope.', might also be our prayer for ourselves.

One can only hope we learn to be with each other more kindly, more generously, more lovingly.

To allow the fire of God's spirit to refine away our lesser thoughts and actions.

To promote a more just and loving society, which will mean going without certain things, truly sacrificing for the sake of others, like the widow and her two mites.

What's astonishing though is that while we go on failing, God goes on redeeming.

Come the end of Amos' prophecy and the note of hope implicit in all the judgements is finally unleashed overtly.

'I will restore David's fallen shelter, I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins... the days are coming, declares the Lord, when new wine will drip from the mountains, and flow from all the hills, and I will bring my people Israel back from exile.'

The plumb line is set among the people to rebuild the city of God.

To bring hope. And redemption.

It would be in the personhood of another prophet that God's plumb line would be set for all eternity.

It would be in the carpenter from Nazareth that the crooked walls of the world would be made straight.

Jesus is the plumb line of God.

He is the prophet, the judge, and God's eternal word, all incarnated in a human life.

All wrapped up in one.

He doesn't only show us how to be, but transacts our redemption by laying down his life for us.

The plumb line of God is set through Golgotha.

Set through the way of love and self giving.

And set through an empty tomb.

This is the call he makes to us.

Jesus, God's own plumb line, is set among us.

When we don't measure up, he calls us to straighten our walls, to live as a redeemed people of grace.

To not let the prosperity that surrounds us fool us into thinking that's what we should place our hope in.

Jesus calls us to be different.

And the world desperately needs a people to show it a different way.

Build the walls of faith strong, true, with living stones of faithful lives, of communities of mercy and peace, and the fallen shelter will be restored for all.

Amos is no question a prophet for our time, if we would only heed his message.

One can only hope.

Amen.