

Proper 10. Year B. Rod Prince

Texts: Amos 7: 12-15
Mark 6:14-21
Ephesians 1: 3-14

Last week the Gospel reading was about Our Lord visiting his home area and pointing out that a prophet is not without honour in his own town and among his own people. This week we hear about two prophets, Amos and St John the Baptist.

If you want to be hated by all people. If you want to say nothing but those things which people least wish to hear, If you want to place your life at constant risk, endure hardship and come to a sticky and untimely end (today's reading details St John's execution and tradition has it that Amos was stabbed to death by Amaziah the Priest's son.) then becoming a prophet is the thing to do.

The best description of a Prophet comes from the the Book of Isaiah and is one we recite every Advent when we read the prophecies about the birth of Jesus. A prophet is "A voice crying aloud in the wilderness". The principal function of a prophet is to proclaim – which is the primary meaning of the Hebrew word used to describe prophets "Nabi". Prophets are committed to the task of proclamation to the point of obsession. They are willing to risk their own safety, comfort and reputation in order to fulfil the prophetic task. They are all possessed with an inner driving force that compels them, even unwillingly at times – remember Jonah - speak the word of God.

External worldly pressures never compromise their commitment to their mission. John did not wrestle with how he should point out the unpalatable truth about Herod's position. He just said it; the plain unvarnished truth.

The hallmark of a prophet is that they wait on God. They are not distracted from waiting on God. Through their prayerful lives they enter into a deep dialogue with God which gives them the authority to carry His message and to be his messenger and intercessor; their prayerful lives, far from making them remote, means that they are astute observers of life and the human condition.

Prophets are not fortune tellers. They understand the times in which they live. They understand God's purpose and they address the issues which separate the thoughts and actions of the people from God's purpose. They call for repentance and for the return to a righteous relationship with God. The restoration of justice and the righting of social injustice is a prominent demand. Justice for the prophets means the protection and the accordance of equal rights to underprivileged members of society. That is repentance in action.

Are Prophets a thing of the past? Did they and the need for them die with St John the Baptist? St Evagrius the Solitary developed a comprehensive list in 375 AD of eight evil thoughts, or eight terrible temptations, from which all sinful behavior springs. Pope Gregory refined them into the seven deadly sins. Of these Evagrius said that the

three 'demons', that are the ruin of us are:

- wanting what other people have even though we don't need it (envy),
 - wanting more of anything than we require (greed),
 - and, worst of all, the urge to seek the approval of people whose approval is not worth having.
- Remember the temptations of Jesus: to be greedy, to seek power and to please someone whose approval was not worth having? He said no to the lot of them.

Let us take each of those demons in turn and examine them and think of examples:

Wanting what other people have even though we don't need it (envy).

Where shall we start; well how about the playground? All of us can remember either having done this to others or having it done to us. It may have only been sweets, or a toy but that can inflict scars for life on both the perpetrator and the victim. Or did perhaps, we stand by in the playground while a bully picked on a victim? Do we support dictators who bully their neighbours?

Wanting more of anything we require (greed)

The cause of most wars down the largely inglorious history of the human race is because we want resources that other people have – land, water, minerals, oil. Do we buy products from, or invest in, firms that exploit workers just so we can have something more than our neighbour?

Out of sight is out of mind. In the UK we do not see crushing poverty or the gross and widespread abuses of injustice. But our social systems are not universal and we benefit from their absence elsewhere around the world. It allows us to import cheap products, which are the result of sweatshop labour when

we should be buying Fairtrade goods. We fool ourselves that living standards are better for all because poverty is offshore. Likewise, we turn a blind eye for commercial and diplomatic reasons to the same social injustices which Amos condemned and which are prevalent in important trading "Partners" such as China, India and Saudi Arabia.

The distribution of wealth is as imbalanced today as it was in Amos' time. As in Amos' day over 80% of the world's resources is in the control of 20% of the world's population. Keeping up with the Jones' is always at the cost of someone and the environment.

And lastly, the urge to seek the approval of people whose approval is not worth having. In today's story, Herod getting the approval of his wife by giving in to her perverted desire is an approval that is not worth having. How often have we done something against our better judgement in order to win favour or to impress the people whose company we keep?

Herod, despite all his official power, was showing off in front of his guests but it cost someone their life. How many world leaders have fallen into war because they had boasted of their country's power or made a promise which for reasons of personal pride they could not back away from. How many innocent people have died as a result of puffed up pride?

We need prophets now. We need people who expose the lies told in public life. We need people who expose those who exploit and bully others. We need people who expose injustice. These are exactly the same issues that bothered Amos and his fellow prophets including St John the Baptist.

And we have them. There are people who stand up today and whistle blow; who expose those in authority who exploit and corrupt. They can be found at all levels from the international level, the national level, or on a local council or in our work or even in the church. What do we do to support them? Do we distance ourselves from them, do we condemn them, do we silence them or conspire against them. Do we voice our support for them in the comfort and safety of our home yet remain silent in our support outside? Or do we heed their words, examine our actions against the truth of their words and turn again to that right relationship with our God, to honour all people and in so doing to love the God who so deeply loves us