

Proper 10, 2012

Old Testament: Amos 7: 7-15

Psalm 85

Epistle: Ephesians 1: 3-14

Gospel: Mark 6: 14-29

What has Amos do with Paul and Luke? What has the plumb line to do with anything? Plumb lines are standards against which other things are judged, and so we can link that with Paul's hymn of praise as a standard for us to use for ourselves. But the murder of JB?

I think it's not so much JB that's the centrepiece of the gospel, but rather Herod. What's going on in Herod's mind? Herod liked to listen to JB. But we also see that Herod is fickle—or rather, weak in the face of his wife's jealousy. It would be easy to make smart remarks about the extent to which husbands go to please their wives, or vice versa, but that is the cause of the problem here: the desire to please someone else, to seek their approval. John didn't have the guts to stand up to his wife's bullying. He indulged it. Did we stand by in the playground while a bully picked on a victim? Do we support dictators who bully their neighbours? Do we buy products from, or invest in, firms that exploit workers?

I've said it before, and I'll say it again that there are three urges, three 'demons', that are the ruin of us: 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. 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 go along with a bully, only to regret it afterwards? How often have we failed to speak out when we see something wrong, only to regret our failure afterwards? Herod, despite all his official power, was showing off in front of his guests.

John was in prison, but his soul was free. Herod was not physically imprisoned like John, but he was imprisoned in his attitudes, his pride, his greed, his envy and his desire to seek the approval of his wife whose approval was most certainly not worth having. He was weak. Amos and JB are those who dare to point out unpalatable truths. They are prophets.

You might ask: what is prophecy?

- is it telling the future in a magical kind of way? NO
- is it simply guessing? NO
- is it analyzing the trends of the present and predicting what might happen? I THINK SO

Prophecy is expressing what comes from within, without worrying about how your remarks will be taken. It is a fearlessness about what others will think, or how they will react. It is not letting what others might do influence what you have to say. It is *not* seeking the approval of others. And it is *not* about self-interest—far from it, for prophets are usually criticized, imprisoned, punished, and hounded out.

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.

Prophets make us uncomfortable because:

- they tell us what needs attention in ourselves – and in society.
- they ask painful and unsettling questions.
- they point out the truth.

They are *childlike* (Emperor's new clothes). They point out how ridiculous are the layers, the fig leaves, that we wrap around things to disguise the truth. They away the illusory mask of the manipulative world to show what the true situation is, in order to lead people towards hope.

Why do we resist prophets? Why are we like Amaziah and Herod?

It's to try and hang on to the present. We are unwilling—afraid— to let go and see what happens. We try to control the future. We try to buy security. It is impossible, despite what the insurance industry says.

We have prophets in our own heads—conscience if you like: the niggle inside that tells us maybe we shouldn't do something, but we do it anyway. 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. He refused to show off. That is the plumb line against which we can judge our own thoughts and actions. Paul tells us how to be strong in the Lord, wearing spiritual armour. *Mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*

Now, finally, look at the end of gospel:

'they took JB's body and laid it in the *tomb*.' Here's something to ponder this week:
tomb, Greek mnema, mnemonic, memorial, memory.

We imprison, entomb, ourselves in our memories. Our memories limit us and tie us to the past. In dementia, people are often stuck in the past.

The message of the resurrection is that the tomb is opened. The chains that bind us fall away. Our hearts are free (Wesley). Let go of the past: forgive, don't be afraid, make good use of what is given to you. Escape from the prisons we make for ourselves with envy, greed and wishing to please others. Measure yourself not against the current fashionable media icon or celebrity, but against the plumb line to whom Paul refers in today's epistle.