

Amos – the Last Call (Amos 5 v 18-27 Luke 13 v 1-9)

On the 28th of August 1963, Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln memorial in Washington DC and delivered his famous ‘I have a dream’ speech. It was a call to the country and people he loved to practise the Christian faith and principles on which their nation had been founded. In his speech Dr King loosely quoted two passages from the Bible, both Old Testament prophets. One was from Isaiah 40, the other from Amos 5 which we read together today.

‘We will not be satisfied’ he declared, ‘until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream’. The agenda that day was racial equality in America but in their original context these words are part of something much deeper and greater, a call to turn in humble penitence to God to avert His holy judgement.

Ah but, some might say, where was God when we needed Him? Where, for example, was God on 9/11 when the Twin Towers came crashing down under terrorist attack? How could God allow such a thing?

The Biblical prophets might ask a different question.

Why *should* God protect and prosper nations that were founded on Christian principles but have largely turned away from Him, His Word and His laws? Listen to what the first President George Washington said as America was inaugurated as a nation in 1789:

‘The propitious smiles of heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which heaven itself hath ordained.’ (30th April 1789)

Why should God bless people who despise Him and treat His commandments with contempt? Why should we be surprised if, after decades of idolatry and immorality, God lifts His hedge of protection from a nation, allows enemies to invade and the economy to flounder? For people who worship money and sex, such things may be warnings of worse judgements to come!

Because this is not a new pattern, it’s happened before, 700 years BC when the kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria.

Leaders and citizens alike practised a barely nominal national religion for the Lord their God. They were really much more captivated by the sensual idols of

their neighbours. They sacrificed their children to Canaanite gods Baal, Moloch and Ashtoreth. So God sent drought on the land and with it fiery prophets like Elijah, Elisha and Hosea. Repentance was shallow and revival limited so Aram and Assyria were permitted to encroach on Israeli territory. But the people persisted in their devotion to worldly idols and worldly values.

Spiritual darkness leads to corrupt practices. This same pattern is repeated in different places throughout history. We see it borne out in the New Testament where the Apostle Paul comments on 1st Century Graeco-Roman society in Romans 1. Twisted ideas prompt perverted practice. Human pride quickly produces a self-centred, ruthless, unsafe society.

Without reverence for the Creator and His laws, there is little respect for human life or any law. The Lord laments through his servant Amos in ch 2 that His people 'sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals' (v6). Where there is widespread false belief life becomes cheap.

Witness the resurgence of human trafficking and slavery in the 21st Century. People are being cruelly abused, bought and sold like a throwaway commodity. We've swallowed the lie that the human race has evolved by chance and life is all about survival of the fittest so we can go to town and buy shoes or flesh for around the same price.

'I withheld rain from you,' says the Lord to His people, 'yet you have not returned to me.' (4 v 7-8) They've had signs and sermons, now this is the last call, the final offer of grace and mercy through Amos, who, like Hosea records his message as a written testimony and warning for generations to come:

'Seek good, not evil, that you may live.' he writes. 'Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say He is. Hate evil, love good, maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.' (5 v 14-15)

In strong words the prophet leaves us in no doubt as to what God thinks of religious profession that is not backed up with sincere action. What good are formal services, what does it matter which songs we sing if our hearts and lives are not pleasing in His sight? There needs to be justice, there needs to be righteousness.

Justice means respect for fellow human beings, fair dealing instead of exploitation. This flows more naturally where there is righteousness, the desire to please God in every area of life. If we love the Lord our God with all our

heart and mind and soul and strength we will be so much more inclined to love our neighbour as ourselves and do to others as we would have them do to us!

Amos says these things should be like rivers in our communities, living and continuous, powerfully moving, flowing, consistently supplying, refreshing, regenerating. We remember that Jesus would later speak of supplying His followers with 'streams of living water' through the Holy Spirit.

If we want to see the finest example of justice and righteousness we need look no further than Jesus. Just observe how he welcomed the crowds, all sorts of people, how he treated all with the same generous kindness, sharing love without ever compromising His joyful obedience to the Father or the message of the Gospel.

On occasions this required Him to speak plainly as a prophet, like Amos urging people to repent like here in Luke 13. And Christians have a responsibility to pray for our communities and make this message known!

The holiness and integrity of God require Him to punish sin. Individuals or nations that break His commands must expect no less than judgement in this life and the next! But God's heart toward His creation is love, His desire is for our salvation and blessing. So He sends signs and warnings and prophets to turn us from folly, self-harm and disaster. The Good News of Christianity recorded in the words of Scripture is the offer of grace, the real possibility of redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God the Son.

Make no mistake, judgement will one day fall on those who turn away from God, His truth and His standards. But for those who turn back, who sincerely, deeply repent and forsake all wrongdoing, there is powerful, soul-transforming forgiveness and life everlasting.

Romans 3 v 21 declares:

'...a righteousness from God...has been made known, to which the Law *and the Prophets* testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.'

Praise His name!

Amen