

## **‘Alas for those who are at ease in Zion’ – A Homily for Trinity XV**

*Amos 6.1a, 4-7*

*Psalm 146*

*1 Timothy 6.6-19*

*Luke 16.19-end*

Despite the unifying movements of national grief that the death of our Late Monarch Queen Elizabeth, generated, there can be little doubt that we face a painful time as a nation and in our world: Russian aggression in Ukraine seems only to intensify, energy prices continue to soar even as our government scrambles to respond, and the cost of living crisis has hit the poorest amongst us, with the Financial Times even going so far as to say that income inequality in the UK is so large that we could be described as a poor society with some pockets of very rich people.

It is in this context that we encounter the prophet Amos today, an eighth century prophet whose words sound dangerously prescient for contemporary ears, an ancient voice speaking out of the traditions of Israel, whose words of judgement explode open our contemporary injustices: ‘alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches... who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.’

But who is this prophet and why should we take any notice of him? It is fair to say, I believe, that our contemporary society suffers from an acute sense of amnesia. We constantly forget history and so view our own situation as utterly new. We can see this in the word ‘unprecedented,’ which is bandied around on almost a daily basis on every media channel and every newsreader. What we are facing has only ever been faced by us, we are unique in history. But, as the Wisdom writer reminds us, ‘there is nothing new under the sun.’

If we look at what is happening in the world into which Amos speaks, we might well be surprised by what we find. Gerhard von Rad describes that world in terms of social havoc and disruption. A number of threads were beginning to come undone: The first was

Israel's reliance upon God himself, undermined and fractured by their turn to syncretism, a kind of new-age absorption of a number of trendy ideas, all of which spoke of the 'spiritual' but none of which allowed the corresponding demand of holiness, discipline and justice. The second was a new sense of Israel's autonomy and success – instead of looking to God to provide salvation, now the state looked to its own political alliances and military might. Israel, it seemed, was well on the way to secularisation, a belief in her own self-made destiny in the world. The third was due to the movement of wealth as economic focus moved from the country to the new towns. The honourable status of the peasant began to ebb away as the ownership of land was concentrated in the hands of a few capitalistic town-dwellers and social inequality became severe indeed. Finally there was a change in geopolitics itself as the rise of Assyria began a new age of empire.

The collapse of a nationwide faith and the loss of coherence, a sense of national pride and destiny, the creation of a class of the super-rich and the corresponding abuse of the poor, and the flexing of international powers. Perhaps Amos does have something to say to us after all? But even as Amos speaks with prophetic insight and passion about the crisis looming for his people, and even as he articulates this crisis in the most uncompromising and volcanic of ways amongst all of the prophets, this crisis never becomes for him a cause of despair. Why is this? Because the crisis of world history is for Amos the crisis of God's own appearing within it. Indeed, it is in this crisis that we hear the cry of God itself, a cry of creative anguish and prophetic summons.

In PewNews this week I responded to an article in the Telegraph by Madelene Grant entitled, 'Britain is yearning for traditional Christianity.' In the article she argues that the ceremonial rituals surrounding the Late Queen's funeral have opened British eyes and ears to the reality of mystery and transcendence and the beauty and necessity of traditional Anglicanism. As lovely as this all sounds, it seems completely wrong to me. If anything, I believe the passing of our Monarch heralds a new deepening of secularism, perhaps even a crisis in the heart of Established religion itself.

Amos believed that social fragmentation and the abuse of power was leading to a confrontation with God himself, not the 'god of the sanctuaries and pilgrimages,' or the

domesticated gods of national religion, but rather a confrontation with the explosive reality of the God revealed in Scripture, the God who threatens all human systems of power and exploitation and who gathers the broken, the poor and the wounded.

Amos' radical prophetic attacks first on the dangerous neighbours amassing all around Israel, but then spectacularly turned against Israel itself – Israel, 'the elect of God,' elect not in terms of privilege or security, but rather in terms of responsibility and justice – revealed a community in tatters. As von Rad writes, 'Amos shows us a society whose social life is cleft in two – a property-owning and therefore economically self-sufficient upper class lived at the expense of the 'little people,' and the wrongs done were particularly apparent in the administration of justice... only full citizens could sit and speak in the courts... slaves, foreigners, orphans and widows had no one to uphold their claims.' This is not a society that is light years away from our own.

Only an honest articulation of who we are and where we stand in history will bring us face to face with the living God. We can try to face the crisis before us alone, standing in the strength of our own convictions and secure in our political and economic choices, or else we can admit our fallibility and culpability and stand before our God naked and vulnerable. And like the prophet Amos, it is in the crisis itself that we will finally hear the turbulent power of God's word, a word that threatens to re-create all things and re-order our world in blessing, justice and peace.