

The Prophet Amos, a voice for today?

Opening Prayer: Loving God we gather as your people, we seek your presence in your inspired word, our scriptures. May our minds and hearts be open to your living word, nourishing our lives as we seek the paths that you would have us take. May your word continue to light our way as we strive to reflect your love to all. We ask all this in Jesus' name.... Amen

Background: Amos, the earliest prophet to have a book in his name, preached in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during a time of prosperity in the mid 700's B.C.E. just prior to Assyria destroying Israel in 721. Amos was not a "professional" prophet, one attached to/supported by a King or Temple priests, but rather a shepherd and dresser of sycamores who was called by God to prophesy. He felt that God's message was for all people, not just the Jews. He saw God's hand in both the covenant and Exodus as well as the defeats suffered by the Jews, proclaiming that sinful lives of the well off in Israel earned their fate with the complicity of God. The poor and needy were completely exploited by the rich and Amos spoke directly, clearly and confrontationally to the well off of God's call for social justice. He thus was an initial voice challenging the belief that worldly success was a blessing from God and those ill or less fortunate were being punished for having sinned. Amos differs from other prophets in that he not only preached against the neighboring nations and their sinfulness, but (gasp) against the Jewish nation itself. When he prophesied the destruction of the temple sanctuary, the fall of the kingdom and the captivity of the people, it was too much for the priest of the Bethel temple who,

fearing the displeasure of the King Jeroboam II, drove Amos from the temple.

Amos proclaimed his oracles verbally which were collected in book form much later. This may account for the interesting verse movement in the New American Bible in Am 5:6-10 in which verse 7 follows verse 9.

Now let's discuss some of Amos' challenges and their parallels, if any, to our lives today.

Please join in.

If we listen today we can hear the echoes of Amos' words:

Amos: He was not a "trained" prophet thus independent and able to preach against the authorities of the day. He was in fact thrown out of the temple and told to go home.

Today: Do we listen to prophetic voices who challenge our government or church leaders? Do we discount information not proclaimed by "officialdom"? If so we miss hearing the cry of the poor.

Amos: God's covenant is not a blanket promise to destroy all enemies, nor are other nations and peoples excluded from God's care. Amos says all people are equal in God's eyes and Israel will be punished for its sinfulness.

Today: We are called to love one another, how completely are we committed? Do we limit our care to those who are family or like ourselves? Our lives will bear the fruits of our actions, both in terms of our needs in the present and our satisfaction with our lives in the future.

Amos: His incendiary words against those who were unjust, who cheated the poor, who disregarded the needs of others are a slap in the face to the well off. He saw these as the greatest sins, implying that social justice is required by God and those who do not practice are sinners of the worst stripe.

Today: Religion and social justice are tied up together. Our treatment of others exemplifies our understanding of God's call to love. How do we view the proposed invasion of Iraq? How do we support food programs for the needy, both abroad and at home? What do we think of our country's current immigration policies? (Many more examples, encourage class to respond)

Amos: His judgment of the nations included neighboring countries as did all prophets but he included Judah and Israel as well.

Today: Can we take our United States position as gift without any concomitant responsibility? Do we allow others to criticize and speak of our nation's failures without labeling them un-American?

Amos: He sees Israel's covenant with God not as a privilege but as a call to greater responsibility. They are God's chosen and this must make them sharers of that gift with others.

Today: We see a parallel in Jesus' saying that to those to whom more has been given, more will be expected. Are we comfortable being privileged in knowing God's gifts to us? Do we sometimes want to tell God to "come back later"?

Amos: He decries the festival celebrations of Israel, not because the rituals are bad per se but because the people return to evil ways as soon as the festival ends.

Today: Is our ritual action rote? Are we led to be better people by our participation at the Eucharist? Does our prayer include praise and thanksgiving to God or do we only talk to God when we need something?

Closing prayer: Loving God you who have gifted your people with this aching love that we are to give away lest it consume us, help each one of us to know that language is only the simplest

form of expressing your infinite love. Help us to know that the examples of our lives with all their trials, failures and disappointments are still filled with your presence. "Give us hearts for love alone" so that your kingdom may be seen by all as the place where you would have every person live. We thank you for your presence among us and for the joy that you bring to us through your son Jesus Christ. Amen