

## **Go on, worship some more. You know you enjoy it!**

*Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2010*

**Texts:** Amos 8:4-7

Things were going very well in Israel under King Jeroboam II. Partly through the weakness of its neighbours, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had made significant territorial gains. Commerce was thriving – a merchant class had grown up who

... lie on beds of ivory and lounge on ... couches,  
... [and] eat lambs from the flock and calves from the stall (6:4)

In this climate of prosperity, culture and the arts thrived:

[The people] sing ... songs to the sound of the harp  
... and improvise on instruments of music. (6:5)

Religion was thriving, too. Although Jerusalem and its temple now lied in the Southern Kingdom, the northerners had built magnificent shrines at Bethel and Gilgal for the worship of Yahweh. People flocked to these places to worship. And what an experience it was! Listen to Amos:

Come to Bethel ... [and] to Gilgal ...  
Bring your sacrifices every morning  
your tithes every three days;  
bring a thank-offering of leavened bread  
and proclaim freewill-offerings ...  
for so you love to do, O people of Israel! (4:4)

They loved the worship. Part of it was, of course, the magnificent music: Amos talks about 'the noise of [the] songs' and 'the melody of [the] harps'. But they also loved the giving – tithes, thank offerings and freewill offerings galore. You can almost see the adverts outside the shrines at Bethel and Gilgal: 'Go on, worship some more! You know you enjoy it!' But it wasn't just the worship. The worshippers were careful to observe the Law, too:

'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain again;  
and the Sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale?' (8:5)

In other words, they rested on the Sabbath and other religious festivals such as the New Moon, exactly as Moses had commanded. This stuff must be the envy of rectors! Shops close on Sundays. Instead, people flock to worship services that they enjoy, with magnificent music and offering plates full to the brim. And as they leave the morning service, they cheerfully say to each other, 'How we enjoyed that! See you this evening!' How much more can one ask for? God must be pleased.

But then this Southerner came along, a certain Amos of Tekoa. He wasn't even a 'pro' – a mere livestock farmer. He went along to Bethel and Gilgal, and said:

Come to Bethel – and transgress;  
to Gilgal – and multiply transgression;  
bring your sacrifices ... and tithes ...  
for so you love to do, O people of Israel! (4:4-5)

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them ...  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps. (5:21-24)

Strong words; and, according to Amos, the words came straight from God!  
Apparently, God had had enough of all this worship, and was minded to bring it all to  
a crashing end:

I will punish the altars of Bethel,  
And the horns of the altars shall be cut off and fall to the ground. (3:14)

... do not seek Bethel  
and do not enter into Gilgal ...  
for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,  
and Bethel shall come to nothing. (5:5)

Gilgal did indeed go into exile when, thirty years after Amos spoke these words,  
Israel was conquered by a resurgent Assyria. It did all come to a crashing end.  
According to Amos, it was God's doing. Why?

Well, here is a clue:

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:  
Seek me and live,  
but do not seek Bethel  
and do not enter into Gilgal. (5:4-5a)

Apparently, the people had forgotten to seek God. You can almost hear the howls of  
protest when Amos said this. 'What do you mean we're not seeking God,' they'd say.  
'Come and join us at one of our services in Bethel or Gilgal. Listen to the music, join  
in the liturgy, look at our giving.'

'Sure,' replies Amos. 'But you're doing it *for yourselves*.' (4:4-5)

Come to Bethel ... [come] to Gilgal ... bring your sacrifices ... for you so love to do!

For *you* so love to do. They had quite forgotten that worship should have been about  
seeking God. Instead, their worship had turned inwards, into a self-seeking exercise.  
*They* enjoyed it: the music, the liturgy, maybe even the sermons! But Amos knew  
that this was all a sham. At most it was religious entertainment, but it was never  
worship. So what's gone wrong? Here's Amos' answer:

Seek the LORD and live,  
Or he will ... devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.  
Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,  
and bring righteousness to the ground! (5:6-7)

There was no *justice* and *righteousness* in the land! That was what was wrong. In fact, those words 'justice' and 'righteousness' run right through the book of Amos like a refrain. *That* was what God was looking for:

Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (5:23-24)

Now, 'righteousness' in Jewish thought is never just a legal thing – simply a matter of being 'in the clear' with respect to some law or other. No. 'Righteousness' for the Jew is a matter of 'right relatedness' – standing in the right relationship with God, with people, and even with the animate and inanimate creation. And 'justice' means everything we do that promotes righteousness, or right relatedness.

Defined like this, 'righteousness' and 'justice' cover almost everything we do – from making a decision whether to fly or to take the train, to giving to the Pakistan flood relief, to the way how we as St Peter's relate to all the groups who use our Hall. Amos' particular concern was with the absence of right relatedness and justice in the economic sphere. For example, our reading today tells us that the merchants cheated their customers with false weights and measures. And the gap between rich and poor was growing alarmingly. Ivory beds for some (6:4), while we heard in our reading that others had to buy 'the sweepings' from the threshing floor to satisfy their hunger (8:6).

To this very religious bunch, God said through Amos, 'Stop being obsessed with your music and your liturgy, and do something about the way you relate to each other! Instead of the noise of songs and the melody of harps filling the air at Bethel and Gilgal, I want to see justice and righteousness flooding the land like a torrent.' That was the burden of Amos message to the Kingdom of Israel 2700 years ago.

I wonder if Amos were to come to St. Peter's today, what would he say to us? I think our music, our liturgy, and dare I say our sermons, should prove every bit as good as what they had at Bethel and Gilgal. But why are we doing it? Why are we here worshipping?

It is all too easy to assume that we are worshipping because we love God, and are seeking God's glory. Almost every church I've ever attended, high or low, evangelical or liberal, has made this assumption, just like the ancient people of Israel. We may be right to so assume. But alarm bells do ring in my mind from time to time. For example, I don't know how many times people have asked me at the end of a service, 'Did you enjoy that service?' Enjoy! What's *that* got to do with it? Unless we are just like the people that Amos spoke to: 'Come to Bethel ... [come] to Gilgal ... bring your sacrifices ... for you so love to do!' (4:4-5) They worshipped because *they* enjoyed the experience; nothing more.

So, if we seek to listen to Amos today, then we should pause and think, and ask ourselves whether we are worshipping for the right reasons. How do we know? Amos gives us a very simple test – do we care about righteousness and justice? In other words, do we care about how we relate to each other, to our community, to our world? And are we doing our utmost to ensure that everything that promotes right relationships is done? If so, then, yes, indeed, our worship is the right kind of worship. But if we think that justice and righteousness defined in the broadest possible terms is none of our business, then God’s judgement delivered through Amos to Israel also applies to us: our Sunday worship is no more than religious entertainment that God does not care a hoot about. To such religious entertainment masquerading as worship, God says this:

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

...

But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

And in case we think this is just outmoded Old Testament thinking, just remember what Paul said to the Corinthians:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal ... (1 Cor 13:1f)

Are we prepared to let justice and righteousness break out in our midst this creationtide like a flood and change the way we worship? Or are we so wedded to what we do that our answer to Amos’ call is, ‘No, thanks.’?

Let us pray.

Lord, have mercy.  
Christ, have mercy.  
Lord, have mercy.

Amen.