

Fourth Sunday before Lent (Evensong)

Amos 2: 4 – end; Ephesians 4: 17 – end

I think the sociological jargon is that life is becoming atomised. Everything is becoming disjointed and fragmented. Instead of society cohering as a whole we have bits and bits there, each doing their own thing. People become increasingly specialised, staying in their own compartment but there's little sense of it all hanging together.

And so in the midst of this, religion slips out of the main stream. It becomes a privatised matter that you may or may not choose to bolt on as a spiritual optional extra. I know of one person whose family approve of him going to church because they're glad he has a hobby. He could have played golf, he could have gone swimming, he could have grown prize-winning chrysanthemums, but he chose to faff around at church instead.

Viewed like that, religion has nowhere to go other than inwards. It becomes very personal, very inward and very spiritual. If things are not spiritual, religion can have nothing to say to them. There might be issues to be addressed, but the right and the responsibility to address them belongs to people who are not religious, or at least who are not being religious when as they address them.

Of course, 3000 years ago, or whenever it was that Amos was trimming his sycamores and trying to dodge the call to prophetic ministry, things were very different. Every aspect of life was unavoidably religious. Civil society was a religious enterprise. So when things go wrong in that society, when it becomes dystopian, with corruption and exploitation and the abuse of economic power; or, to quote Amos more directly, people "sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals . . . trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted

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out of the way”; when this happens, the challenge to it comes from within a religious framework.

In the Hebrew society we meet in the scriptures, the ruling elite gathered a class of professional prophets around them. They were the sort of spin doctors and special advisers of the day. They said what their masters wanted to hear and encouraged them to pander to their own agendas and prejudices. The similarity to Donald Trump’s special adviser Steve Bannon being appointed to the U.S. National Security Council and occupying this somewhat ambiguous position in the White House is notable.

These profession prophets could do nothing to rein in the dehumanising and self-destructive hubris in which they were complicit. Only somebody with the authority and authorisation of God could do that. And so Amos, however reluctantly, had no option but to leave his sycamore groves and speak truth unto power in the name of God.

There is no point in agonising or lamenting over the sociological fact that religion has been pushed so far back into its spiritual box that neither you, nor I, nor the Archbishop of Canterbury, nor the Pope, by the exercise of our prophetic ministry, can speak truth unto power and thwart either Donald Trump’s demonization of ethnic minorities or Philip Hammond’s ambition to convert Britain into an off-shore tax haven at the expense of the protection of workers’ rights. (that’s the selling the needy for a pair of sandals bit.)

It is worth noting, though, that what the writer to the Ephesians, from whom we heard in our second lesson, considers to be antithetical to the Christian faith is hardness of heart, falsehood, bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling and malice. These are values which can be present or absent just as much in the public square as in personal morality. So we have something to bring to the public square, even if not the role and the authority

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or the opportunity and permission to proclaim it in God's name.

In an atomised, fragmented society of specialists operating each in their own sphere, the right and the responsibility to command accountability from excessive executive power belongs, not to a Prophet like Amos, but to an independent judiciary and an independent press. If we believe that when Amos was exercising that role he was God's agent, we have to place some hope that God's purposes of protecting and nourishing everybody who is made in his image are somehow served by the judiciary and the press today, although clearly not in an overtly religious way.

And yet in the last six months – and indeed in the last 24 hours – the legitimacy of an independent judiciary and press has been called into question on both sides of the Atlantic¹. And so, as I ponder on how the

¹ Donald Trump had just defied a federal court decision that his travel ban from seven mainly Muslim countries was unconstitutional; when the UK Supreme Court

heritage of Amos can be honoured in my discipleship in a world that has seen 3000 years of change since he answered the call of God, I wonder whether the small thing I can do is to keep buying newspapers².

Amen.

had ruled that only a vote of Parliament could trigger Article 50 to remove the UK from the EU, the judges had been dubbed "the enemies of the people."

² Of course the flaw here is that it begs the question of which papers to buy. It was in certain newspapers that the Supreme Court judges had been called the enemies of the people. However, I fell short of promoting some papers over others from the pulpit. My implicit contention was that it could be considered a Christian duty to support a rigorous and independent media.