



A real test of judgement

Amos 7:7-17

As I indicated last week, I am looking at two Old Testament passages. I turn to Amos, who came from a small town in Judah called Tekoa. Amos' influence has been out of all proportion to what you might imagine was possible.

Amos had a powerful message with a striking relevance to any community serious about its social responsibility and its standing before God. It could be said that Amos is now one of, if not the most preached of the prophets of the Old Testament. It was not always the case!

When we use the word prophecy, it can be understood in at least three different ways:

- As a prediction of the future
- In relation to the gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12)
- In relation to condemning injustice and pointing out what is wrong ... now! Perhaps better understood as "Forthtelling!"

One writer has pointed out that none of these understandings of prophecy does full justice to Old Testament prophets like Amos and Hosea. It would be incorrect to describe them as "writing prophets" because they probably wrote little or nothing themselves.

Amos may well have been the first of Israel's prophets to have his words preserved in written form, but that does not mean to say he was the first prophet. He comes in a long line of prophets, for example Elijah, Elisha and many others.

It was about the middle of the eighth century BC that Amos began his prophetic task. Our knowledge of him is restricted to the pages of the Old Testament. We know he worked with sheep and fig trees and that he had visions of God, finding himself in a confrontation with the priest at Bethel.

Amos had already had two visions – one was about a swarm of locusts (7:1-3) and the other a related vision carrying with it the threat of drought (7:4-6).

Tekoa was only a small town, about nine kilometres south of Bethlehem, and about 17 kilometres from Jerusalem. Amos was not a man of the court like Isaiah and he didn't belong to a priestly family, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. We know he earned a living from the flock and the sycamore-fig (1:1; 7:14-15). However, we can't be certain whether he owned the flocks and groves or was a hired hand.

However, we acknowledge that he had enormous skill in the spoken word and obviously a broad understanding of history and the world around him. He was certainly an educated person and, as James Ward pointed out, his "influence in Western religion has been enormous".

Amos was no ordinary man, but his uniqueness does not lie in any sense of sophistication, flamboyance or eloquence, which some of the other prophets possessed, but in a willingness to declare a strong message to the people of Israel. This message had powerful political implications, but he was not part of any political party. His message



had great religious significance, but you couldn't call him a religious leader. He could best be described as a person "under orders". He would not shun or shirk his responsibilities.

The most important aspect of the calling of the prophet – and what draws me specifically to Amos – was his sense of unstinting faithfulness which was not intimidated by the power of the priests. He was not in any sense "a fair weather prophet". He ministered in good and bad days.

The fact that people saw Jesus Christ in terms of the prophetic is linked to the same willingness to deliver whatever was understood to be God's word for a specific time. One only has to consider Jesus' return to Nazareth, his preaching in the synagogue (Luke 4), and the powerful words he read from prophet Isaiah:

'The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.' (Isaiah 61:1-2)

From the outset, Amos' message was bound to be unpopular ... because he was considered to be a foreigner from the south who prophesied in the north, daring to be critical! He also brought a message of rebuke at a time of prosperity. Nobody wants to hear this!

Text: Amos 7:7-8 –

'This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord asked me, "What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb line," I replied. Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer."

Dreams and visions do not of themselves bring new information about the world, but they do awake the mind and senses to new possibilities. These words point out that the time of forbearance is exhausted and God's judgement has to be faced.

The prophet is not saying that somehow God has lost his patience, but that we must take seriously God's assessment of our lives – and particularly the life of our communities.

The political, social and religious context is of a people who feel smug and secure in their situation. The nation and people felt that God was smiling upon them and all was rosy in the garden. Complacency has been replicated time and again throughout history. Here in Australia, people have at times been taken aback by the effects of the economic and political climate ... when, up until very recently, they assumed "all was well".

Israel's prosperity increased their religious and moral corruption. The dominant call in the prophecy is to social justice (5:24) as an indispensable expression of real spirituality.

Here we have a prophetic picture of God "standing against a wall" and the wall is measured by a plumb line. Let us consider what this has to say to us.

Sydney Lovett observed that two prophecies had spoken of famine and drought, seasonal occurrences over which the human community would have no control. Perhaps we



understand this much better in the world today than in previous generations. Amos intercedes to the only One who could intervene.

However, when we look at the prophecy of the plumb line, we see a wall as the result of the labour of people and, if it buckles for whatever reason, its deviation is marked on the plumb line and the builder is responsible!

Oscar F Reed writes, “One can vision Amos standing silent before the judgement of God. There was nothing more to say. Judgement was inevitable because the building was of man’s own doing.”

A well-defined disagreement often exists between those religious people who say true religion is right belief – and others who claim true religion is right practice. Christians today would see the two as complementary to one another. Here at Wesley Mission, our “Word and deed” emphasis has so much to say to the wider Christian community and beyond.

The third vision of Amos pictures a wall of metal which surely symbolises military strength. What the prophet sees in the Lord’s hand was probably also made of such metal, but represents something very different. It speaks of a “standard” which God expects of his people.

This is to be welcomed by:

A people who are looking for god’s way

All individuals need to be open to God’s ‘standard’ but it is particularly relevant when we are speaking of communities. The Lord had come into the midst of the people of Israel. For years they had carried on with misguided worship and the unjust administration of God’s Mosaic Law.

Communities, as well as buildings, need to be built to a specification. The picture presented to us is full of strong metaphors; it is the world of walls and bricks, measurements and verifiable tests.

This vision is different from the preceding two, which contain no element of test. However, in the plumb line we have what Motyer described as “delicate, precise, differentiating, taking note of what meets requirements and what does not”.

This has a great deal to say to us as an engaged people. It fundamentally questions our:

- Concern for the poor – we cannot be a Christian community and not have a concern to do something about the inequalities in the world around us – and particularly those we can do something about.
- Reaching out with the gospel – there is a call to share the good news of Jesus Christ and we cannot deny the nature of this God-given imperative. It will question the way we do this; it is underpinned by compassion and concern for the whole person.
- Love for each other – God’s plumb line for us as a community is against our love for one another. Our task is not to pull one another down, but to build each other up. If we choose the former, we must not be surprised if we lose our way.

This is demonstrated by the fact that Amos is a prophet



The most obvious characteristics of some of the people at the time of Amos were affluence, exploitation and the profit motive. One writer has described these three aspects as “the most notable features of the society which Amos observed and in which he worked”. This can be seen in:

- The rich had several houses each (3:15)
- They furnished those houses ostentatiously (6:4)
- They looked after themselves well (3:12, 4:1, 6:6)
- The poor were really poor! (2:6-7)
- There was racketeering (5:10, 12, 8:5)

Amos was gripped by a sense of calling as a prophet (7:14-15) and, when a person is actively engaged in the call of God, he or she cannot avoid speaking because of being conscious that God has spoken to them (3:7, 8).

Amos did not see himself as delivering a particularly audacious message. His prophecies were not predictions. How people can make wrong assessments of others! For example:

- “It doesn’t matter what he does, he will never amount to anything.” – Albert Einstein’s teacher in 1895.
- “Laws will be simplified. Lawyers will have diminished and their fees vastly curtailed.” – Journalist Junius H Browne in 1893.
- “Before man reaches the moon, your mail will be delivered within hours from New York to Australia by guided missiles.” – US Postmaster General in 1959.

Amos knew that God did not want to punish Israel and, in the midst of all the warnings, we read that God’s call is to “Seek me and live ...” (5:4)

Shown in the willingness of Amos to raise his prophetic voice

When Amos considered the community around him and looked at those who practised religion, he might have expected a people who were free from ungodly selfishness.

However, what he found was a context where people were very religious and ceremonies were well-attended. The practise of religion was very popular (4:4, 8:3, 8:10). Sacrifices were offered and the music and quality of worship was of the highest standard.

His conflict was with a priest called Amaziah, who often spoke about the best kind of worshipper ... but we note he himself was:

- Concerned only for the establishment (7:10)
- Focused on ecclesiastical proprieties (7:13)
- Disinterested in a word from God (7:12 and 16)

Amos had to raise his voice against what could be called “double-talk”. His grounds for speaking and prophesying call us to reflect on our own communities today. Motyer again observes, “Amos might well have been walking through any of our great cities.”

He calls for people to see things differently. By a change of attitude, the world becomes different. Life will change because we have changed.



A people willing to accept fair critique

What do you do when standards have gone? If you stand where Amos found himself, you must speak. The same applies today.

A community that is alert to the Holy Spirit will always be willing to listen to what God has to say. The reality is that speaking with clarity does not guarantee people will listen.

Amos was modest about himself

Amos had a proper sense of modesty about his calling as a prophet. The name “Amos” is derived from the Hebrew verb which means “to load” – or we might say “to carry a load”. Martin Luther associated the prophet’s name with his message, ‘He can well be called Amos; that is “a burden” – one who is hard to get along with and irritating...’

Amos’ modesty has to be understood against the fact that, though he came from a small town, he is interested in larger affairs. He must have had considerable skill as a spokesperson with great courage.

His background as a shepherd of a high breed of sheep and a person who went to the marketplace with sycamore figs would mean that he travelled widely. However, Amos makes it clear he is a layman, called to be a prophet while going about ordinary work (7:14-15)

Amos could have said to himself the words of Paul: “And who is equal to such a task?” (2 Corinthians 2:16)

Paul concludes, “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.” (2 Corinthians 2:17)

“A man is humble when he stands in the truth with a knowledge and appreciation for himself as he really is.” (The Cloud of Unknowing)

Amos knew the needs of people

As we have said, as Amos travelled the country, he saw the deep needs of his people – and the call had to be that they should turn back to God and to the ways that are his.

Amos was no formal prophet in a special school, nor from a prophetic family (7:14, 15) and his simple outlook on life meant he felt for those who suffered. The sins he condemned were not primarily ritual, but moral offences which all resulted in the damage to people’s lives.

The prophet saw God’s judgement had already begun. John W Gardner wrote that for sensible people “... every day is a day of reckoning”.

A people who are accountable

There are some exceptional difficulties that arise with the phrase, “a wall built with a plumb line”. It is best dealt with by considering the two aspects: firstly, the wall was built with a plumb line and, secondly, the wall is subject to the plumb line test. I understand this



as meaning that everything that was necessary was built into the situation from the beginning in order to pass the tests that would be faced later.

This suggests to us that God has equipped us as a people with all that is necessary for our willingness to be open to God and to serve him to the best of our ability in his grace.

In practical terms, this will mean being:

Accountable in the way we live

All of us are called to be willing to face up to God's judgement in our lives. It is far too easy to listen to a prophet like Amos and feel smug, as he addresses his words to the high and the mighty. Not one of us stands outside his strong words.

In many church lectionaries, morning worship today will have focused on the great parable of Jesus "The Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37), which speaks of our relationship to our neighbours and what we will do in practical terms for those in need.

This drives at the centre of the matter, for compassion is at the heart of what it means to attain eternal life. The Christian way is a way of life, not just belief. These words speak to us all, 'The challenge before us is to reorder our thinking and reorder our lives in such a way that compassion becomes paramount.'

Accountable finally to God

Our understanding of accountability in many aspects of life relates to each other or a particular task that we have in mind. The prophet reminds us that we are ultimately accountable to God and not just to each other.

Amos taught that God is interested in every aspect of our lives and that we must be responsible for our actions.

Some critics of Amos say there is no good news to be found in its pages. This is most unfair, because we find that he writes of Israel's restoration:

"In that day
I will restore David's fallen shelter –
I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins –
and will rebuild it as it used to be." (9:11)

During my ministry, I have been involved in the building of new churches and extensions to premises. One feature of any building project is the periodic visit from the local authority official to carry out a building inspection. Amos acted as a God-appointed building inspector - and God holds a plumb line against all our lives!

How do we, as a community and as individuals, measure up?