

## **Going straight**

I think we're pretty well-off in Australia, at least compared to the rest of the world. The country is prosperous on many levels, but I'm also sure that we can all find things that aren't good in our society.

This morning's reading tells us about Amos, a shepherd from Tekoa in southern Judah, called to be God's prophet – to speak God's word – to the people of northern Israel. The kingdom of Israel in the north was somewhat more civilised than rural south that Amos was used to.

Things were going well for Israel; on the surface at least - the people were living under King Jeroboam, and it was a time of economic success and military victory.

God was 'on their side' – or so they thought. Jeroboam sought to build his kingdom and he was quite successful. Under his 41-year reign, northern Israel expanded, the nation prospered, but as the rich got richer, the poor got poorer. We read in the 2 Kings 14:24 that Jeroboam "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...".

Throughout the book of Amos, God shows Amos what is going wrong with the nation. God tells of the judgment of the people who do not turn from their sin. In chapter 5, God says to the house of Israel, God's chosen people, "seek me and live; do not seek Bethel...for Bethel will be reduced to nothing".

Bethel was the centre of all that was going wrong with Israel... Jeroboam had set up Bethel as a national shrine, the people worshiped Baal and prayed to a golden calf... Jeroboam had established a religion that would appease his people. It was accepting of all sorts of practices: it had a few priests and rituals, but it didn't really require much in the way of obedience or dedication from the people.

The people had chosen to forget about what God wanted, and instead decided to choose their own standards for living, and they were doing pretty well for themselves.

They were intent on deciding for themselves what was right and what was wrong, but God called Amos to prophesy to them, to call them back to God.

Our reading opened with Amos being shown a vision of God – we heard:

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? (7:7-8)

As you probably know, a plumb line is a cord tied onto a weight that construction workers used, in the days before spirit levels and laser levels, to guide construction, but it was also used to test the end product. To test if a wall was 'plumb', truly vertical – to see if it had been built properly. To see if it was straight.

And God spoke to Amos:

"Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer."

The people had been ignoring God's commandments and coming up with their own. God's commandments aren't simply rules to follow, but they are a description of how a community in relationship with God and in relationship with each other should live.

If we are living the way that God wants us to live, then we will have no other Gods, we won't make or worship idols, we won't take God's name in vain, we will remember the Sabbath and honour our parents, we won't kill, commit adultery or steal, we won't bear false witness nor covet anything of our neighbours.

And when God tested the people, when he held his plumb line against the wall that Israel had become, the Kingdom was found wanting. And this would have a consequence for Israel: "The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam." (7:9)

And Amos, poor Amos, is given that vision – that prophecy – to carry to the people. Amos is going to be the bearer of bad news.

People's usual reaction to bad news tends to be blocking their ears and saying "nah nah nah" or shooting the messenger.

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, goes for the latter. He chooses to shoot the messenger.

From verse 10, "Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying: 'Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.'"(7:10-11)

So Amaziah distorts Amos' message slightly, and tells the king that Amos' prophesy is against the king, and that the king will die.

And after telling the King about this troublemaker prophet, Amaziah confronts Amos directly: "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom." (7:12-13)

Go back to where you came from. Prophesy there, not here. Bethel is the king's. Bethel is a temple of the kingdom – and note that he says that it's a temple of the kingdom and not a temple of God.

When Amaziah called him a "seer", he was insulting Amos. A seer is nothing more than a fortune teller. More than likely, then as now, there are several fortune tellers to choose from. Take your pick: Astrology, numerology, tarot reading, psychic reading, tea-leaf reading – the list goes on. Anybody can take a guess at the future or tell you what you want to hear and take your money. But Amos was not a fortune teller for hire.

Amaziah was doing his best to make sure that things stayed just the way that they were.

Amos wasn't intimidated by Amaziah, though. Not by his status as priest of the temple, and neither by his influence over the king.

From verse 14 Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" (7:14-15)

Amos seems to have been educated, but he wasn't a priest, he hadn't set out to be a prophet, and he didn't come from a family of prophets. But he was called by God to be a prophet – to speak God's word to the people.

I can imagine the confrontation. The rustic shepherd and tender of fig trees, simply dressed, and likely simply spoken too, standing up to the grand priest, grandly dressed and grandly spoken.

And Amos says to Amaziah: "Now then, hear the word of the Lord. You say, "Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the descendants of Isaac.' "Therefore this is what the Lord says: "Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.'" (7:16-17)

I think, these days, the phrase 'speaking truth to power' is over-used, and sometimes mis-used, but this is truly what Amos' prophesy is. But importantly, and once more, Amos' words are not his own, but God's.

It's a rough message that Amos delivers: Your wife will be prostituted, your children killed, your lands given away, you will die in an unclean place and your whole country will go into exile.

The judgment of God on the people of Israel was at hand. Judgement on the people from the king and the priest down. Things didn't measure up according to what God wanted – they weren't plumb, level, straight or true.

The judgment of God was a scary thing for the people. They should have known that if they weren't living as God wanted them to live, then there would be a consequence. David says in Psalm 51:4, to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned" – all sin is ultimately an affront to God.

But as we read the scriptures and learn of sin, we also learn of forgiveness

The psalms are overflowing with talk of God's forgiveness "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions" (Ps 51:1).

And the gospels talk about the consequences of sin and of God's judgement: John the Baptist said, "The ax is already at the root of these trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Lk 3:9), and Jesus said "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." from Jesus (Matt 18:6).

But whenever we think about sin and judgement, we need to remember the forgiveness that we have in Jesus. Whatever we may have done is washed away by the blood of Jesus on the cross. And because of that, we are saved.

And we have wonderful poetry in our hymns to remind us of the forgiveness we have in Jesus – from John Newton, "I once was lost, but now am found", and from Charles Wesley "My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose went forth, and followed thee".

But despite the promise of forgiveness that was – and is – available, the people of Amos' time – from the king and the priest down, were not listening to Amos' warning. They weren't turning from their sin, they were making no effort to 'go straight'.

Modern Christians often shy away from talking about God's judgment. But judgement is necessary – things can't be made right without doing something about what is wrong.

But what about us today? How do we measure up to God's plumb line?

Invariably, if we are measured against God's plumb line, we fall short – we won't be plumb or true. No matter how much we go to church, or how much we give, or how many good works we do, or how much we pray, or how many roster slots we fill at church, we fall short. As St Paul wrote to the Romans: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)

If people are measured by God's standards, they will fail. We will fail. We will all fail.

But – and it's a bit but: all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. (Romans 3:24-25)

But even knowing of that justification, there is nothing comfortable about measured against God's plumb line. It is easier to ignore than to face. It's easier to remain set in our ways – the ways of the world – than to change and to live our lives the way God wants us to live: In relationship with him, and with each other.

In order to live the way that God wants us to live, we need to change. To turn around. To go straight.

And we also need to share that message with others. With the whole world.

Just like Amos, we have a message to share. A message that is unpopular, a message that is often at odds with the ways of the world. We may sometimes feel very much like rustic shepherds confronting the pillars of society or religion. We may not be confronting kings and

priests, but we need to share our hope in Jesus with a world which doesn't know God as we do, a world filled with entitlements, and rights, and self-justification.

The problems of the nation in Amos' time were on an epic scale. Outwardly prosperous and inwardly corrupt. In the next chapter of Amos, Israel is described as a basket of ripe fruit... and the rot, had well and truly started.

History shows that Israel didn't respond to Amos' warning.

But we are fortunate that we can view Amos' warning from the other side of the cross – knowing God's plan for salvation through Jesus' death for us. And knowing that God shows us the way to show gratitude for that salvation – which is simply living the way God wants.

As I shared last week, the prophet Micah, tells us succinctly what God wants - To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”.

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But with God's help through the grace of Jesus, we can respond. And we can change our lives, our society and our world. So let us all seek to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Let us work to measure up to God's plumb line, and be true to him always.

Amen.