

THE PROPHET AMOS—(Amos 7:12-15)

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

12 July 2009

When we hear the words “prophet” and “prophecy” we tend to think of people, who predict the future. That’s why we often have a hard time understanding, who the Old Testament prophets were and what their role was in ancient Israel.

The ancient Hebrew prophets were first and foremost instruments chosen by God to manifest His holiness, reveal His will and help prepare the Israelites for the Messiah. As His chosen spokesmen, they were constantly reminding the Israelites of their duties and trying to bring them back from rebellion against God to obedience and faithfulness to God.

The prophets were men, to whom God spoke in a real sense, men who had an intimate experience of God. When they prophesied, it was not so much that they were foretelling the future, as it was that they saw both the present and future through God’s eyes and could, therefore, see what God had prepared for Israel if they did not follow His laws. They, therefore, had two functions. One was to predict future events. But this function was only secondary and was the least important part of their role. Their primary function as prophets to Israel was to proclaim the word of God and faithfulness Him.

The ancient Hebrew prophets were not philosophers or theologians concerned with those bigger issues of life, such as being and the nature of existence. They were, in contrast, very earthy people, who through their proclamations often sought to shock people out of lethargy rather than edify them through erudition of lofty truths. Their pronouncements often led people to despise them, even sometimes attempt to kill them as in the case of Jeremiah, because people had become comfortable in their lives of sin and the prophets were pointing out things that they should be doing to change, something that most people don’t want to hear. So, instead of issues of great magnitude, they had a greater sensitivity to matters of everyday life in the realm of morals and faith. They tried to get people to understand that they must be responsible for their actions, even in seemingly insignificant everyday matters. They pointed out things that may have seemed insignificant and peripheral to us but which were things very important in God’s eyes. They were impatient with excuses and criticized pretense and self-pity. And when they prophesied, it was not so much about future events as it was about what God considers important.

The Old Testament has sixteen prophetic books: four major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, and twelve “minor prophets,” so called because their recorded message is relatively short or because they were called by God to speak only to a given segment of the ancient Hebrews rather than to the entire nation of Israel.

Today, in the first reading we heard from the prophet Amos. He came from a town in southern Israel southwest of Bethlehem named Tekoa and lived in the 8th century B.C. during a time when the Israelites were split between two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Amos wasn’t born a prophet as was usually the case with prophets in ancient Israel. He admitted this himself when he said: “I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores. The Lord took me from following the flock, and said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”¹

So, his call was totally unexpected. But God called him and he was sent from the comfort of his home in the Southern Kingdom to prophesy in the Northern Kingdom.

There was great prosperity in the Northern Kingdom at that time but there was also much misery and many evils. It was a society that was profoundly divided between the very rich and the extremely poor. The rich lived in houses of hewn stone panelled with ivory, dined at sumptuous banquets and looked with disdain on those, who had little. Not only did the poor barely scratch out a living but as the inequality in the distribution of wealth increased, their lot became even more wretched.²

And so, God sent Amos to them with a call for social justice. He spoke out against the pride, splendor and abundance that he saw there. And he spoke out against economic and physical oppression, which were as abhorrent to God as their empty worship because although people went through all of the motions of worship, it had no effect in their lives. “The people of the north [were] blessed with prosperity and peace but their religious practice [was] purely externalistic—it [did] not affect the way they [lived].”³ There was no correlation between worship and life. As could be expected, the people of the Northern Kingdom didn’t appreciate this Judean from the south coming up to point out their faults, just as we heard in the today’s reading from the Book of Amos. The priest of Bethel, Amaziah, said to Amos, “Off with you, visionary, flee to the land of Judah! There earn your bread by prophesying, but never again prophesy in Bethel.”⁴

“Amos [was] perhaps the most severe among all the prophets. In very strong and poetic language, from beginning to end, he [condemned] external religious ceremony and practice that [camouflaged] social corruption and [was] not accompanied by internal conversion to the Lord. . . . He [prophesied] that those in the north [would] be conquered and carried off into exile. That [was] exactly what happened a generation later when the Assyrians destroyed Samaria in 721 B.C.”⁵

The Book of Amos is the story of a people far away and long ago. It is a page from the ancient history of the Chosen People, which chronicles part of the long arduous road of our salvation history. But it doesn’t stop with just being a historical account because Sacred Scripture is always alive and always relevant for every period of history and for every people. The **exact** historical and cultural conditions that existed then are not present now, but the social and economic conditions, as well as the hypocrisy of empty worship that Amos decried returned time and time again on the stage of world history. In fact, it is strangely ironic how many of these conditions prevail today, accompanied by an arrogance and feeling of superiority by so many in today’s western societies. Just as in Amos’ time, people today have become comfortable in their lives of sin and don’t like it when others point it out to them. The root of these problems in Amos’ times was religious and moral decay, the conditions which have characterized western civilization for the last several decades.

Just like John the Baptist at the time of Christ, Amos was sent by God to call people to a true repentance, to return to God. And if they did and obeyed God’s word, they would be saved. But if they didn’t, the “Day of the Lord”, as Amos called it, would visit them as a day of judgment and doom. This is a message that we constantly need to hear, whatever time and culture we live in. Ours must be a constant effort to repent, to turn back to God and to live His Law—because God’s action in history is not to destroy. When he chastises, it is to save us from our own destruction and give us hope.

¹ Amos 7:14-15.

² *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. (Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd.: London, 1953), 659.

³ Baker, Kenneth S.J., *Inside the Bible* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1998), 188.

⁴ Amos 7:12-13.

⁵ Baker, *Inside*, 186-187.