

Sermon given by the Revd. Maurice Houston
12th July 2015

Today's readings.

Amos 7: 7-15

Ephesians 1: 3-14

Mark 6:14-29

It's quite a story: people denouncing each other, solemn oath taking, riotous parties, the top dog giving in to one side's demands for the other side's head on a platter and seductive dancing. And I'm only talking about the European Union monetary fund meetings over Greece. Though I'm not too sure about the seductive dancing.

The readings today are about prophets again and about conflict. Conflict with those who, like Amos, hold a plumb line to us as individuals, as a church, as a society. My father-in-law was really good at making and fixing things around the house and decorating. In his well organised tool-box he had a plumb line- a shaped lead ball on the end of a piece of string- for checking that things were truly vertical.

This is what Amos is doing: holding up a line against society to check what is not perpendicular, not right. He denounces many injustices. The weights and measures in the market places were false. The poor were treated with contempt by the law courts. His constant theme is that powerful people are corrupt and care for nothing but their own pleasure and increased wealth, while the poor are oppressed and exploited. National living wage; inheritance tax; benefits claims; disability allowance.

It would be easy hold a plumb line up to the Church. To talk about women bishops or gay marriage or allegations of child abuse.

It would be easy to hold Amos' plumb line up to consumerism and politics and the cult of celebrity and talk about hedge fund bankers, company bosses who earn many times the living/ or minimum wage/ to TV personalities who seem so far from reality that they have no moral compass.

We need prophets to speak out against these. Someone asked me last week- I pass the question to you: "who are today's prophets?" Desmond Tutu? Pope Francis (who said last week, "Unbridled capitalism / unfettered pursuit of money is the 'dung of the devil'"). Could it be Owen Jones or Peter Tatchell? Russell Brand?

People who speak the truth to power.

Speaking out like that makes people uncomfortable. Amaziah merely banishes Amos. Herod imprisoned John the Baptist because he opposed his marriage and then had him beheaded because of his need to be liked and approved of.

Being a prophet is seldom easy. No one ever wants to be prophet, it is not a career choice. Speaking against the accepted norm. When William Wilberforce spoke against slavery, many good Christian people kept slaves and thought that was ok. When Nelson Mandela stood against apartheid- there were church congregations thought they had a biblical mandate to keep blacks in subjection / separate.

When the prophets speak, are they addressing me? Who would hold a plumb line against my attitudes and behaviour? About how I feel about my money; about how much I can get for nothing; about my ability to criticise or gossip. Who holds a plumb line against my selfishness, my pride, my desires?

The story of John the Baptist is also a plumb line. How often does my concern for social approval cause me to go along with evil? I cannot look at Herod and detest him for his weak-willed behaviour. Instead I look at myself and am embarrassed at how many times I have made decisions based, not on love, but on my desire to be liked and accepted.

Where are the prophets who would encourage me to speak with them against injustice. Where are those who encourage me to love - full, free, costly love?

The plumb line of the gospel is surely love and only love. A desire for justice, for peace, for fair treatment, for a more compassionate society. These are part of what it really means to be a Christian and a loving human being.

We, in the Church, are meant to be a sign of that humanity. The emerging movement of Liberation Theology from Latin America in the 60s, focussed on the priority of the poor. Gustavo Guterrez said, our judgement must be against "social injustice which plunders the masses and feeds the wealth of the few."¹ Are we needing to hear that voice in Britain today? It is our behaviour as much as, more than our attitudes that must change: not just talk, but to do. We are supposed to have paid attention to that plumb line of the gospel, to reject injustice, to love mercy and to care for the stranger.

It is because we find it hard to hear this, that God sends us prophets, outsiders like Amos, outspoken critics like John the Baptist, who will make us feel uncomfortable with their message.

Uncomfortable because it challenges us deeply, as the plumb line of the gospel always does. From compassion in the Eurozone, to understanding in our Synods, to hospitality for the outsider. It calls us to self examination and to conversion - conversion of our attitudes. And no one needs to get beheaded.

¹ Guterrez, Option for the Poor, in Systematic Theology. Perspectives from liberation Theology: 24