

## WORSHIP AND JUSTICE

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Amos 5:24: "But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

How often in recent years we have found ourselves caught up in the tension between contrasting emphases.

There was in the old liberal Protestantism that optimistic outlook on human possibilities, that confidence in the presence of God within the individual and the kingdom of God being built in human society. But then with war, depression and holocaust came a new awareness of what was called our existential predicament, of the depths of our alienation from God and ourselves, of the abiding relevance of the Gospel that spoke of sin and grace.

There was the preoccupation with peace of mind, labelled by its critics, "the cult of reassurance." And there was the protest against that with its emphasis on judgment and challenge.

There was the boom in church building, the renovation of sanctuaries, the return to elaborate liturgies, the preoccupation with doing things in worship just right according to the most ancient traditions and the most impeccable contemporary taste. And there was the sudden burst of spontaneity and informality, of rock guitars, dialogue sermons and hamburgers and cocoa served for communion.

There was the revival of devotional classics and the multiplication of prayers groups. And there was the insistence that the church get "relevant" to the outward affairs of this world.

There is the reaching out for life-changing emotional experience and there is the somewhat muted, but persistent demand that the church address itself to issues of poverty, conservation, disarmament, political oppression and other human needs.

Perhaps we think we invented such polarities in modern times. If so, we are wrong. They are there in the Bible itself. Two weeks ago I spoke of the Twenty-third Psalm. I suppose this is the all-time classic of personal religion. Not only that, but its emphasis is on assurance and guidance. God is the protector here, not the challenger. And the shepherd is one who lives by quiet trust, not by commitment to great tasks.

I will fear no evil  
Thy rod and thy staff  
They comfort me.

How different the mood of another Old Testament book speaking the mind of a man who we know for a fact was a shepherd. Amos of Tekoa was a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees. Like the author of the Twenty-third Psalm his figures of speech reflect that pastoral background. But in Amos' case the figures seem to arise from the harsh limestone hills south of Bethlehem that were his home. He thinks of the lions that devour the flocks and of the swarms of grasshoppers that consume the sparse pasture. Out of such reflections he pictures the destruction of Israel. There is nothing of com-



fort in this book, at least not in our modern sense of that word. But there is denunciation and doom, and the only words of hope have been added by later editors. There is hardly anything here of personal religion as we usually think of that, but there is a great deal about social righteousness. The book of Amos never will be as popular as the Twenty-third Psalm. It never will make as pleasant reading on a warm spring evening as the Song of Songs. But throughout history there have come times when people grew sick of piety that seemed self-centered and of worship that seemed escapist and of private delights that seemed an avoidance of public evil. People have risen up in indignation, demanding justice for themselves and others. And in that situation there is only one sort of word that comforts people in the original sense of making them strong. It is the kind of word Amos spoke with his sledgehammer cadences:

The lion has roared;  
who will not fear?  
The Lord God has spoken;  
who can but prophesy? (3.8)

.....  
Thus says the Lord:

For three transgressions of Israel,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because they sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of shoes -  
they that trample the head of the poor  
into the dust of the earth,  
and turn aside the way of the afflicted (2:6-7a)

.....  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (5:23-24)

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Amos lived at a time when the United Kingdom of Israel had divided into a southern nation known as Judah and a northern nation known as Israel. Amos came from the south, but evidently he made frequent travels north in order to sell his produce. At that time, in the reign of Jeroboam II, Israel experienced great prosperity. The country garnered much profit from its control of one of the chief trade routes of the ancient world. For the moment it was free from interference by surrounding nations. Amos, accustomed to a hard and simple life, observed critically the self-indulgent ways of his northern cousins. He saw that some of the more affluent were grown so rich that they not only possessed winter houses, but summer houses as well. He observed the lavish parties, the heavy drinking, the sexual orgies, some of which may have been connected with pagan religious festivals.

All this high living, he observed, was accompanied by callous indifference to the poor. Not a man for chivalrous language, Amos calls the rich women of Samaria "you cows of Bashan." They lie around he says, calling to their husbands, "Bring me another drink," while the needy pay for their dissipation.

But Amos knows that more than indifference is involved. He sees wheeler-dealer landowners conspiring to take away the freehold of the small farmer by forcing him into debt and selling him into semi-slavery. He sees unscrupulous merchants committing fraud in the market places by means of



rigged scales. He sees protest movements put down brutally by a political structure in league with the wealthy. If the big police states of Egypt and Assyria want to know what violence and oppression are like, says Amos, they ought to come and observe what happens to the rioters in Samaria, the capital of little Israel. When Amos calls for justice, it is not just court-room justice he is concerned about, although he has something to say about that too. There is often a connection between economic and political injustice and what happens in court rooms as the story of The Wilmington Ten makes clear. That is something we ought to look into, by the way, especially since the United Church of Christ is directly involved. If we are moved by the spectacle of Roots on television, we ought to look into the situation of the nine black men and one white woman given sentences ranging up to thirty-four years in Wilmington, North Carolina following a civil rights protest. But when Amos speaks of justice, he is speaking of social justice in all of its forms.

Now along with all this dissipation and injustice Amos observes something else. Religion is very much "in" among these people. They go trooping out to shrines such as that at Bethel, where they hold big celebrations, offer lavish sacrifices and afterwards throw swinging parties. Their worship seems to be a kind of celebration of their own good fortune to which God is made party by spectacular bribes.

Well, Amos was brought up to worship the same God, but he never saw the Lord in that light. Unlike the gods of some other nations the Lord demands righteousness. For him there can be no separation between prayer and ethics, worship and justice. And so Amos is convinced that the Lord is revolted by all this fancy worship:

I hate and despise your feasts  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies (5:21)

The Lord will only accept worship where there is justice. Because there is no justice, he declares his judgment, and that judgment is a word of doom.

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Now Amos is not just quietly writing these observations down in a book for publication when he gets back to Judah. He stands right there by the altar of Bethel shouting these things at people as they pass by. Naturally, the priest, Amaziah, is annoyed. What is this outside agitator trying to do, attacking mother, God and country right next to the Church? Amaziah writes the king telling him to reactivate the Committee on Un-Israelite Activities and to send over the CIA. And he tells Amos, "Go back to Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

There we have the classic encounter between prophet and priest. The encounter has been going on ever since. Often it goes on within the same individual. For every Christian is called to be both prophet and priest, and every ordained minister is commissioned to be both in a public way. But that is a difficult double-role to master.

For example, the moderator of your church is a prominent real estate man. His position on fair housing legislation runs counter to that taken by most of the prophets. Self-interest calls the tune for economic interests in our society and this man and his colleagues are no exception. Yet he is concerned about the issue, and basically well-intended. He is a nice

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guy, and he has his problems. One night his younger son appears in this man's bedroom doorway and announces that he is thinking about drinking a bottle of iodine. Now you can really do an Amos job from the pulpit on fair housing and the real estate lobby. But can you still be priest then to that man and his family?

Another time there is a couple from outside the church who attend a discussion group dealing with various controversial issues. This couple is very dedicated. The man plans to teach at one of the underprivileged black colleges and he is trying to persuade you to do the same. He and his wife are also very exercised about Vietnam. They want that discussed at the next meeting. You send out a notice to the discussion group saying that since the majority wanted to deal with something else next time, Vietnam will not be the program for that meeting.

On the following Sunday, you are informed after the first of two services that some people are picketing the church much to the delight of a television camera crew. In great indignation you run outside in your priestly robes to discover this pair of prophets pacing up and down with signs that declare "Minister won't discuss war".

You thought you were Amos. But now you know what it is like to be Amaziah.

The Twenty-third Psalm, The Song of Songs, the prophet Amos - how can any individual put it all together? How can the church put it all together? It isn't easy, but that is the challenge held out to us by this horny old God that Moses met on Mt. Sinai. He would seem like an impossible God were it not that he is also a God of hope for the future. That is where Isaiah comes in, whose impossible dream will command our attention next Sunday.