

## Good times

Our Old Testament reading today is from the prophet Amos, who was active around 750BC, a time when, under King Jeroboam II, Israel was prosperous. It was a time of economic success and military victory.

Historically though, prophets were raised up when the nation of Israel was at a low point - the prophet would encourage the people back to God, and by doing this the nation would become prosperous again. But this is not the case with Amos: Things were – outwardly at least – going well for the nation of Israel, and particularly for the wealthy classes.

Outwardly, Israel was doing well, but inwardly, things were not so great. The wealthy were becoming richer at the expense of the poor. The people, God's people, were not living as God wanted them to.

And so, Amos said to them "Hear this, you who trample the needy".

It's an interesting opening, he doesn't tell them that they have turned away from God, or that they've been empty or less than fully committed in their worship, which is the sort of thing we might expect from a prophet. Instead, Amos challenges their actions, what they do, rather than what they believe.

"[Hear this, you who...] do away with the poor of the land."

It was a timely warning for the nation of Israel. And it's a challenge for us today.

Do we trample the needy?

Do we do away with the poor of the land?

Do we? I mean: Here we are in some of the wealthiest suburbs in one of the richest cities in the world, and while there is much variation and we will all be in different circumstances, I think it's fair to say, in world terms, or in historical terms, we are pretty well off.

Do we, just because of our circumstances, and perhaps completely unintentionally, trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land?

Of course, there has been a lot of discussion about the increasing cost of living in recent times. Petrol. Electricity. Gas. Groceries. Telephones. And mortgages, of course.

But we need to keep in mind that the standard of living, has been increasing by more than 2% per year for 25 years, up until the last year or so. What we have – again allowing for different circumstances and variations – has increased remarkably. Perhaps what many people want has increased even more... but that's a different story.

So we should be challenged – in our wealth, in our prosperity: Have we trampled the needy, and done away with the poor?

Amos makes it clear for the nation of Israel, he tells them that they say “When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?”

While they are honouring the New Moon festival and the Sabbath superficially, Amos points out their true priorities – the Sabbath and the festival get in the way of doing what’s important – selling wheat, engaging in commerce. You’ll know the famous quote from the gospel, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” (Luke 16:13) well, the people were trying to do just that, serve God and money – effectively they were saying “Let’s honour God in the temple on the Sabbath and on the special days, but let’s get it over with quickly, so we can get on with business”.

People would never think like that today, would they? Do people worship for the glory of God, or for their own convenience?

It’s a common story throughout the modern church people, particularly those of my generation and younger, have drifted away simply because life has got too busy.

And when the people of Israel did get to business, after the inconvenience of worship, they engaged in it with unscrupulous practices.

“[they market wheat]— skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales,” (8:5b)

Skimping on the measure: wheat was sold by the ephah, a traditional measure, but there was no standards organisation to maintain a standard ephah, no consumer protection body to ensure that all sellers used the correct measure either. So a merchant would reduce it a bit, and another would see that the first was getting away with it and do the same. You can imagine them justifying it... It wasn’t dishonest, really, there’s no standard, and everyone else is doing it. If I want to stay in business then I have to do it.

And at the other end, you needed to boost the price and cheat with dishonest scales. Like the modern caricature of the grocer with his thumb on the scale... to remain a successful merchant you needed to push up the price. To overcharge. To short change.

In fact, as verse 6 tells us, you could “[even sell] the sweepings with the wheat.”, so you could fill out your already reduced ephah with the rubbish from the floor of your warehouse.

So, the ephah has got smaller, it’s got a bit of padding in there along with the wheat, and consumers – the poor – are being charged more for it. It’s a win if you’re a merchant... but it’s not looking good for you if you have to buy from them. And what’s your choice? All the merchants operate much the same way.

Fortunately, nothing like that happens today, after all, we have standards to protect our units of measure. A kilo is a kilo and will always be. A litre is a litre and will always be.

Although... well, merchants can change their packaging sizes, as long as they scrupulously label them. Cans of tomatoes can be reduced from 420g to 400g, and but consumers still buy them by the can. A 'family block' of chocolate can go from 200g to 180g and we still buy it as a family block of chocolate.

I understand that supermarkets prefer to sell large bananas, because people buy bananas by the unit, but pay for them by the kilo.

And of course, these things are all standard practices. Everybody does them. So they must be okay, mustn't it?

It's the system that has made us wealthy as a society, it's the system that keeps the wheels of industry and commerce turning.

Being wealthy isn't a barrier to following God, but it can be - and often is - a significant obstacle.

We can look to people such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Aramethea, who were wealthy and powerful, and who also were clearly followers of Jesus. But from the scriptures, they are in the minority.

It is hard to appreciate the plight of the poor, when you are not living in poverty.

It is hard to feel for the hungry, when you are well fed.

It is hard to understand the nature of economic oppression, when you, even indirectly, benefit from it.

And it is to economic oppression that Amos refers in verse 6 "buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals". They are lending money to the poor to buy those very products. The sandals would be the collateral for the loan... because they would be the most valuable – or possibly the only valuable thing the poor would have owned.

And when the sandals are gone. And when the money is gone. All that is left is to be sold into slavery.

"buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals"

Fortunately, nothing like that happens today, either.

We have consumer credit law. Lenders only lend to those who can properly repay the loan.

Or at least, that's the hope. We have finance packages tied to specific products. We have finance companies advertising that they will lend money to people to people who have a bad credit history, or who are on benefits.

In the 2021/22 financial year, 9,545 Australians went bankrupt<sup>i</sup> because of non-business debts. Helping people deal with personal debt has become an industry in its own right. The Australian Consumers Association through the magazine Choice has warned though that the industry itself may be exploitative, charging fees for what individuals can do themselves.

As a society, we have come to expect *things* whether we really need them or not. And *things* are often very cheap, so we can afford lots of them.

And economic oppression doesn't end at home.

Go to a shopping centre, and to one of those shops that used to be called two-dollar shops, and see how much you can buy for so little. And think about how those products got there. If a T-shirt costs \$5, after the costs and the profit of the shop, and after the costs and profits of the wholesaler, and after the costs and profits of the importer, and after the costs and profits of the factory in Bangladesh... how much can possibly left to go to the poor piece worker who made it?

But it's the churn of the economy, the more we spend, the more there seems to be. Again, it's the system that keeps the wheels of industry and commerce turning.

How different, really, are things for us today, than they were for the people of Amos' time?

Because this was the crunch for Israel – the warning:

“The Lord has sworn by himself, the Pride of Jacob: “I will never forget anything they have done” (8:7)

And it's telling that Amos uses the phrase “the Pride of Jacob”. This is how the nation of Israel viewed God... he was their God, and they were his people. The claimed the promises to Jacob (Genesis 28:13-15):

*“I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”*

but they'd claimed those promises to an exclusive degree: God was their God, and God would look after them. The assumption seems to have been that they could do what they wanted, as long as they kept the Sabbath and had the odd festival.

But the truth was – and is – that God never forgets.

Not the regarding of worship as an inconvenience, nor the skimping of the measures, nor boosting the price, nor cheating, nor trampling the needy, nor doing away into slavery with the poor.

No matter what the people of Israel did; no matter what we do. No subsequent acts of generosity or piety, will ever cause God to forget what they did – or what we have done.

We might think that we'd like things forgotten, but that's not what we need. If I have hurt someone, it might be convenient to have them forget about it, but what I really need would be ask their forgiveness, to acknowledge the hurt, and for them to forgive me anyway.

To forget is not enough. Forgiveness is what we need. And it is forgiveness that God offers us in Jesus.

Forgiveness is so much more powerful than forgetting. In forgiving, God explicitly does not 'forget' rather, as the psalm says "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12)

It can be reassuring that God doesn't forget, that he doesn't simply ignore what we do because of some later, better behaviour. The effects of what we do wrong linger afterward... the effects of sin have to be dealt with.

Today, we often shy away from talking about God dealing with sin and about God's judgement – and Amos' last line is daunting "The Lord has sworn by himself, the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget anything they have done."" It is a warning. People can, and do, spin this warning and other warnings of God's judgement in all sorts of ways. Some will have this showing the unbelievers burning eternally in Hell, some will have our characters being held up before God with all our shortcomings being nicely (and quite painlessly) burned away.

But I think the main point of this warning is not about the nature of judgement. Rather, it's about the fact that the people of Israel could not rely on the idea that God is the Pride of Jacob, that they were the chosen people, to avoid God's judgement. Without becoming preoccupied by the nature of the judgement, we can know that judgement is coming, that it is God's judgement, and that the people of Israel, or indeed us today, cannot rely on inherited 'rights' to save us from that judgement.

And let's be clear that the sin of the nation of Israel in Amos' time was on an epic scale. Outwardly prosperous but inwardly corrupt.

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

We are fortunate that we can view Amos' warning from the other side of the cross – knowing God's plan for salvation through Christ's death for us. But we need to respond to that salvation – we can't go on doing whatever we want – Paul makes that clear in his letter to the Romans - "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1-2)

God saves us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and shows us the way to show gratitude – which is living the way God wants. And that way is not the regarding worship as an inconvenience, not skimping of the measures, not boosting the price, not cheating, not trampling the needy, not doing away into slavery the poor of the land.

Or to quote Micah, another of the prophets (Micah 6:8) "And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God".

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

But with God's help through the grace of Jesus, we can.

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.afsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/quarterly\\_personal\\_insolvency\\_statistics\\_jq22.zip](https://www.afsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/quarterly_personal_insolvency_statistics_jq22.zip)