Prosperity Problems

We met the prophet Amos last week: he was a prophet from Judah, in the south, who was called to prophecy to the nation of Israel in the north. He called the people out on what was going wrong there, and earned the enmity of King Jeroboam and Amaziah, the priest of Bethel.

We know that, historically, prophets were raised up when the nation of Israel was at a low point, and the prophet would encourage the people to repent and turn back to God, and by doing this Israel would become prosperous again. But this is not the case this time around – at least not on the surface.

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

God showed the prophet Amos a vision, "What do you see, Amos?" [God] asked.

"A basket of ripe fruit," [Amos] answered.

Then the Lord said to [Amos], "The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. (8:2)

The basket of ripe fruit was a great analogy for the state of Israel. The fruit is the best it will be – it's been unripe and sour and hard, and now it is soft and sweet, it's delicious. But now, when fruit is ripe, there is only a limited time that it will remain good. The bananas go brown, the apple skin wrinkles, the flesh of the mango begins to rot. Soon enough, all of it needs to be discarded.

And so it was with Israel, it was successful, it was the best it has been since Solomon… but things were starting to rot. It's against that background that Amos brings a dire warning.

"In that day," declares the Sovereign Lord, "the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies—flung everywhere! Silence!" (8:3)

From songs to wailing. From prosperity to death. From a bustling Israel, to the silence of an empty temple.

And so, Amos prophesies to the people:

"Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land." (8:4)

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. Instead, he challenges their actions, what they <u>do</u>, rather than what they <u>believe</u>.

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

Do we trample on the needy?

Do we do away the poor of the land?

Do we? After all, here we are in some of the wealthiest parts of 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.

So, do we, just because of our circumstances, and perhaps completely unintentionally, trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land? We might be prosperous, but does our prosperity bring about problems?

Amos goes on to give some practical examples of what's wrong: 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 might be superficially honouring the holy days such as the new moon and the Sabbath, Amos points out their true priorities – those days get in the way of doing what's important – selling grain, engaging in commerce. You'll know what Jesus said in Luke's gospel, "No one can serve two masters [...] You cannot serve both God and money." (Luke 16:13) – but that's what the people of Amos' time were trying to do. 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 we, as a society, want to get festivals out of the way and open the shops in the afternoon?

It's a common story in churches today – people, particularly young families, drift away simply because life gets too busy. They need to get on with shopping or sport or social occasions.

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

"...skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales...". (8:5b)

In Amos' time, there was no standards organisation, nor any consumer protection body to ensure that all sellers used correct measures either. A merchant would reduce a 'scoop of grain' or a 'bag of wheat' 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 false balances. 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 bag of grain with the rubbish from the floor of your warehouse.

So, the bags got smaller, and included a bit of padding along with the wheat, and consumers – the poor – were being charged more for it. It was good for the merchants, but not good for those who had to buy from them. But what choice did they have - all the merchants operated much the same way.

Fortunately, nothing like that happens today.

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.

We know though that 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 220g to 200g and we still buy it as a family block of chocolate.

Of course, these things are all standard practices. Everybody does them. So it 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 necessarily a barrier to following God, but it can be - and often is - a significant obstacle.

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

It is harder to feel for the hungry, when we are well fed.

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

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

And it is to economic oppression that Amos talks about in verse 6 "buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals". For the poor of Amos' time, their sandals would likely have been the most valuable thing they would ever own. And they might be forced to sell those sandals to buy food... and when the sandals are gone, the only thing left for the poor would be to sell themselves into slavery.

These days, 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 2023-24 year, there were 11,644 personal bankruptcies in Australia. In fact, helping people deal with personal debt has become an industry in its own right. And the Australian Consumers Association has warned though that the industry itself is often exploitative, charging fees for what individuals can do themselves.

But we know that economic oppression doesn't end at home.

Go to a shopping centre, and see how much you can buy for so little. And think about how those products got there. If a T-shirt costs $10, 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 makes it?

We may well say that charity begins at home, but we need to make sure that it doesn't end there.

It's taken a few hits in recent years, but our prosperity depends on growth and the churn of the economy, the more we spend, the more there seems to be. It's the system that keeps the wheels of industry and commerce turning.

Being the part of the system – and benefitting from it – is often unavoidable – in our prayer of confession today we specifically prayed for forgiveness for "when we hurt others, Whether intentionally, unintentionally or unknowingly ."

And we heard in our New Testament reading "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour." I don't know about you, but I certainly didn't set out to act evilly – but I do know that I have benefited because others have been exploited along our supply chains and through our economic systems.

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)

The people had become arrogant in claiming for themselves the promises of God. 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 in at least a token way, and had the odd holy day.

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.

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 often think that we'd like things forgotten, but when we search our hearts that's not what we need. If we have hurt someone, it might be convenient to have them forget all about it, but what we need would be to have their forgiveness: to acknowledge the hurt, and for them to forgive us anyway.

To forget is not enough. Forgiveness is what is required. 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)

Today, we often shy away from talking about God dealing with sin and about God's judgement – and Amos' words are daunting 'The Lord has sworn by himself, the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget anything they have done*"'*.

The people of Israel could not rely on the idea that that they were the chosen people, to avoid God's judgement. They could not rely on their outward prosperity as a sign of God's favour. And today, we can rely on our inherited rights, or claim that our prosperity is a sign of God's favour on us.

Outwardly prosperous and inwardly corrupt, the nation was like the basket of ripe fruit… and the rot, perhaps, had well and truly set in.

Unlike the people of Amos' time, we know the fulfilment of God's plan for salvation through Jesus' death for us. But we need to respond to that salvation – we can't say "I am saved" and go on doing whatever we want – Paul makes that clear in his letter to the Roman, when he says, "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 on the measures, not boosting the price, not cheating, not trampling the needy, not doing away into slavery the poor of the land.

Sadly, as we read the story of ancient Israel we find that they didn't respond to Amos' warning.

But with God's help through the grace of Jesus, we can. In our lives and individuals and as a church, let us to the right thing when we can, let's not be preoccupied with our own prosperity, let's be generous, let's be aware of the needs of others and be charitable to them, and let's be aware of our own shortcomings and our own assumptions of

privilege. And let us always claim and know Jesus' forgiveness, and do our best to follow his example always.

Amen