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## **Hear the Word of the Lord (Amos 7. 7-17)**

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The Bible is a large book – or collection of books. How do we decide what passage we'll hear each week? As I've shared with you before, at Benedictus we do it in two ways. Sometimes, it's preacher's choice. There may be a particular theme we're exploring or event we're marking, and a biblical passage seems particularly relevant. During Lent, for example, when we heard from members of our community about their relationship to the Benedictus Waterhole, I invited those giving the reflections to suggest a text that was meaningful for them and that gave us our reading for the week.

Mostly, however, our choice of readings is guided by a device called 'the lectionary'. Over the centuries, churches have developed various systems to enable a selection of readings from the biblical corpus to be made for weekly worship. In recent decades, what's known as the Revised Common Lectionary has been agreed across many denominations. This lectionary is divided into a 3-year cycle. This year, we're in Year C, which means that overwhelmingly our gospel readings are drawn from Luke, while the readings from the Old Testament are drawn mainly from the prophetic literature. Which is what brings us this week to the proclamation of the prophet Amos, speaking the word of the Lord to a recalcitrant Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Biblical prophecy is distinctive phenomenon. Scholar Jeanette Mathews has remarked that biblical prophets 'spoke into "liminal moments"' – 'times of political and social crisis where normal cultural structures and activities are suspended, leaving the community open to critique or new vision'.<sup>1</sup> These were times, in other words, not so different from our own. So I thought this might be an opportune

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanette Mathews, *Prophets as Performers: Biblical Performance Criticism and Israel's Prophets* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), p.3.

moment for us to explore the outlines of a prophetic spirituality, and to wonder about the notion of the prophetic vocation.

I'm going to start with a brief orientation. According to Mathews, the 'simplest way to describe a biblical prophet is as someone who functioned as an intermediary between the human and divine worlds'. They were mostly 'charismatic individuals', although some texts refer to groups of prophets attached to particular sanctuaries or leaders. 'Jewish tradition referred to forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses, whose prophecies contained a lesson for future generations'.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, however, these prophetic 'lessons' were never mere predictions about predetermined outcomes such as were offered by the augurs and diviners of the classical world – who might read the entrails of a slaughtered beast and tell you whether your ship was going sink or the battle would be won or lost. Rather, biblical prophets aimed 'to shape the future by exposing and reforming the present'. They were 'critical analysts of their own particular social and political situation'. They made visible the underlying dynamics of their community's life in the light of the vision of God and called forth alternative perceptions and possibilities.

Traditional Christian scholarship speaks of the 'Former Prophets', whose stories are told in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, and the 'Latter Prophets' who are purportedly the 'authors' of the books that bear their names. These 'Latter Prophets' are in turn subdivided into three Major Prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and twelve Minor Prophets of whom Amos (along with Hosea and Micah) is one of the oldest. Their titles notwithstanding, each of these books was begun not as a single work, but as a collection of oracles or sayings with their final form the product of a long interpretive process.<sup>3</sup> And here two points seem important to bear in mind.

On the one hand, the various prophetic books reflect very different personalities, theological trajectories and historical circumstances. Their details are

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<sup>2</sup> Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, pp.7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), pp.105-106.

worth attending to. On the other hand, as scholar Walter Brueggemann has said, a certain recurring “pattern” is visible across this literature. This pattern involves a basic dynamic of the prophet proclaiming divine judgement on Israel’s injustice, corruption or disobedience followed by the promise of restoration or hope. It is evident, Brueggeman says, that the sayings of the Latter Prophets have been ‘shaped and edited into a twofold assertion of *God’s judgement* that brings Israel to exile and death, and *God’s promise* that brings Israel to a future that it cannot envision or sense for itself’.<sup>4</sup> In other words, first the prophet denounces what’s wrong in the community’s life and declares God’s displeasure, before offering a word of hope to the penitent and the promise of God’s steadfast and renewing love.

But if that’s the basic shape of prophetic discourse, if that’s what prophets always do and say, then a question might be asked about the point of it all. If God’s people are always going to get it wrong, and God is always going to get cross or be disappointed but then forgive them anyway, then what exactly is the significance of the prophetic vocation? What does the prophet’s voice add to the social, political, religious life of a people? What does the work of prophecy make possible that would otherwise not be possible? These are questions I’d like us to hold over the next couple of weeks.

Our passage from Amos offers, I think, a first clue. Amos has just uttered a word of judgement – arising from a vision of the Lord standing beside a wall with a plumb-line in his hand. A plumb-line was a cord and weight used to ensure that walls being built were properly vertical. The scene in the vision suggests the testing of the straightness of a wall, ‘a parable for Israel which had been built correctly, but was now out of line’.<sup>5</sup> ‘See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel’, says the Lord (Amos 7.8). The subsequent pronouncement of God’s judgement, says one Old Testament scholar, ‘contains an eloquent correspondence to the symbol of the plumb-line; devastation will fall upon the principal structures of the Israelite

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<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.107.

<sup>5</sup> James L. Mays, *Amos* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1969), p.132.

state, its religion and its dynasty. Yahweh [God] has measured the shrines and the “house” of [the king] Jeroboam and found them of no use’.<sup>6</sup>

Unsurprisingly, as is mostly the case for the prophets of Israel, Amos’s communication is not well-received. Amaziah, the state priest at the shrine at Bethel dobs on him, telling the king that Amos is conspiring ‘against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words’ (Amos 7.10); and Amaziah tells Amos himself to ‘go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your 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’ (Amos 7.12-13). In other words, for all its religious overtones, this place of worship really belongs to the state; you are being disloyal to the king and disrupting national life – shut up and go away! Not unlike the response that, until this very week, had been made to Bernard Collaery seeking to expose crooked dealings in our own national life.

But here comes the crux of things. Amaziah speaks to Amos almost as if he’s plying a trade, earning his bread by prophesying (purportedly) on behalf of the Lord, but really free to move on and do it somewhere else. But Amos definitively rejects that characterisation of himself and his words. ‘Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son’. I’m not part of a guild; I didn’t inherit my trade from my father. I’m not one of those cultic functionaries who reliably prophesy ‘disaster for the nation’s enemies and prosperity for its king’.<sup>7</sup> No, ‘I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees’. It was the Lord who took me from following the flock, ‘and the Lord said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel”’ (Amos 7.14-15). And that’s the thing about biblical prophecy. It’s never the prophet’s idea. The prophet is one who has been called, chosen by God, often against their will, and required ‘to convey God’s message regardless of whether it will be received or not by their intended audience’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mays, *Amos*, p.133.

<sup>7</sup> Mays, *Amos*, p.139.

<sup>8</sup> Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, p.9.

And this, I think, is a key element in the recurring significance of prophesy in the social, political and religious life of Israel. There may be, as we've seen, a recognisable, repeating shape to prophetic critique. But what must always be renewed is the community's sense of answerability, responsibility, accountability to God. There can be no true life for a people, no stable justice or peace, apart from listening for the Spirit of truth. But this is what's always being undermined by the self-assertiveness of the powerful and the self-preservation of the rest of us. The prophet, then, is one who, first of all, truly hears. In this sense, prophetic spirituality lies close to the contemplative. And then, having heard, the prophet finds a way to make audible once again the truths on which all our lives depend – so that, as Amos himself put it, justice might 'roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5.24).