

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – July 16, 2006 B

AMOS - PROPHET OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Down through the centuries, God raised up prophets to be his mouthpiece for many different causes. Prophets were people who not so much *foretold* the future as spoke about what God was doing in the here and now.

While all of the prophets in the Old Testament called people to conversion and repentance and to faithfulness to the Sinai covenant, each of them had a particular theme which they often focused on. For example, Isaiah is often called the prophet of “*God’s holiness*” and Hosea is often called the prophet of “*God’s love*”. Amos is usually recognized as a prophet of social injustice because he railed against the social justices that existed in his day. He was an unlikely candidate for the role of prophet for he had very little education and did not belong to a guild of prophets. He never went to school for prophets. When God called him he was a shepherd lad working on a farm tending to sycamore trees. The kingdom had been divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Amos belonged to the south and he was sent to preach God’s word to the well-to-do Yankees in the north. As you might imagine, he was not well received not only because he was a ‘southern boy’ but also because of his aggressive ‘in-your-face’ style of preaching. He could easily be the patron saint of ‘hell-fire and damnation’ type of preachers.

What did Amos find when he came north? He found pride (6:13-14), plenty and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities and might in the palaces. The wealthy adorned their summer and winter residences with costly ivory (3:15) and their couches with damask pillows (3:12) on which they lolled to enjoy sumptuous feasts. They planted pleasant vineyards and anointed themselves with precious, fragrant oils (6:4-6; 5:11). Their women, whom Amos called “*fat cows of Bashan*,” drank wine from bowls (4:1).

Due to the sharp contrast between poor and rich and the fact that the wealthy seemed unconcerned for their less fortunate contemporaries, Amos was sent

by God to decry the injustice of it all; “you do not even know how to do right” (3-10), he accused. Because of this, he said, the poor are afflicted, exploited and even sold into slavery (2:6-8; 5:11), and corrupt judges (5:12) do nothing to correct the situation.

When Amos saw the cruel gaps between “the haves” and the “have nots”, the way the poor were treated, the idolatry and the shallowness of their worship services, he became very angry. He said:

*“I hate and despise your feasts,
I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals.
I reject your sacrifices
Let me hear no more of your chanting
But rather let justice flow like water
And integrity like an unfailing stream.”* 5:21

Can you imagine an ‘in-your-face’ type of preacher shouting such words to people as they went into or left the fancy Shrine of Bethel. We can assume the parishioners becoming very upset and started to send lots of emails to Monsignor Amaziah to get Amos off church grounds. That is where we catch up with Amos and the local pastor in today’s first reading. Amaziah goes over the Amos and says:

“Off with you, visionary, flee to the land of Judah. There earn your bread by prophesying but never again prophesies in Bethel. . . .”

It seems Amos only preached in the North for about six months and then returned to his shepherding and sycamore job in the south. I am sure that he felt that his ‘stint’ up north was a total failure. Yet some time later his recorded homilies became a hot item.

The truth is that prophet’s are rarely appreciated during their lifetime. In fact, many of them were ‘rewarded’ with execution for railing against the injustices of their time. This was the lot of most of the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, John the Baptist, great men and women down through the ages. In our own time people like Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador (shot as he said Mass) and many other men and women in

Central and Latin America in recent years. Their only crime was that they preached a message of social justice and challenged the people who held the vast majority of wealth and all of the power to share with the poor.

Reaching Out to the Poor through Works of Charity & Social Justice Advocacy

Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that religion must be connected with real concern for the poor. Otherwise it is a mockery of God. In light of the intimate connection between Eucharist and outreach to the poor, our food for the poor collection on the first Sunday of the month is very important symbolically. Bringing the food items to the sanctuary rather than leaving them at the truck or in the back of the church is a very concrete reminder of the connection between participation in the Eucharist and outreach to the poor.

We can help the poor by active participation in charitable organizations, through our financial support of charitable organizations or through working to change unjust structures and laws that help to keep the poor poor. The vast majority of us will most likely find ourselves involved in charitable organizations either directly or indirectly. Such organizations are very important in that they respond to the *immediate* needs of the poor for food, medicine, clothing and shelter. I am very grateful to all of you who week after week participate in the work of the Thrift Store, Social Concerns, Daily Bread, Habitat for Humanity. Through your stewardship of time and talent, hundreds of people are helped.

Mother Theresa could be considered the patron saint of charitable organizations. She was not led to fight for *systemic change* in India and other places. Her vocation was to bring *immediate* and often *long term* aid to the poor. Charitable organizations and those who financially support them live the message of Matthew 25:30-46, *I was hungry and you gave me to eat . . .*

Works of Justice.

Works of justice seek to bring about *systemic change* institutions. Advocates in this area seek to change laws that permit abortion and do not give the poor fair representation before the law. In our country over 40 million people do not have health

insurance and many poor end up in poor schools. In recent times the great prophets of social justice have been Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Archbishop Romero, Archbishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela and Susan B. Anthony who fought for voting rights for women in our country. Many other men and women have been killed or jailed for speaking out against injustices. As a result of their advocacy millions of men, women and children have better lives today. In real ways social justice is more demanding than works of charity in that advocates often meet a lot of strong resistance and even violence as they seek to bring about systemic change.

But *both* are needed. Without the work of charitable organizations the poor would die as social advocates lobbied to remove the *causes* of poverty and injustice. Without the work of social justice advocates women would still not have received their right to vote and black people would still be treated like second class citizens. While none of us can be actively involved or financially support every charitable organization and every social justice group, ideally every good disciple of the Lord is supportive of every good cause that seeks to protect and improve the lives of all people inside and outside the womb. Hopefully all of us insofar as possible are intentional or percentage donors to causes that support the poor. By the way, I also believe that all who give of their time, treasure and talent to change our present laws that permit abortion and capital punishment are also prophets in our times. They are prophets of life.

Gift of Water

As most of you know, *Gift of Water* was founded and is directed by our parishioners, Phil & Barbara Warwick. It is a *concrete response* to a very sad statistic: namely that *80% of the diseases in developing countries are caused by bad drinking water.*

Every time *Gift of Water* places a *water purifier* in a home they are making a significant difference in the lives of a family. With the help of many donors, Gift of Water is annually placing close to 8,000 purifiers in homes in Haiti and Jamaica. I am very happy that our Thrift Store is a strong supporter of Gift of Water, presently donating \$5,000 a month. For more information on Gift of Water:

This past fiscal year we gave \$90,000 in tithe monies to the poor at home and abroad. Many parishes now tithe 10% of their annual offertory income to the poor. We are gradually moving in that direction giving 6% this past year. This past year you generous people also gave about \$90,000 to the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

All in all I believe that with your very generous help we at Ascension are doing a pretty good job of being good stewards of the Lord's blessings. All of us pitching in together can make a very significant difference in many people's lives.

TO BE FILLED WITH GOD

O Divine One,
to thee I raise my whole being,
a vessel emptied of self.
O Accept, gracious God,
this my emptiness,
and so fill me with thyself,
thy light, thy love, thy life
that these thy precious gifts
may radiate through me
and overflow the chalice of my heart
into the hearts of all those
with whom I come in contact this day
revealing unto them the beauty
of thy joy and wholeness
and the serenity of thy peace,
which nothing can destroy.
Amen

OPENNESS TO GOD'S WILL

Lord, I do not know what to ask of you.
You alone know what are my true needs.
You love me more than I myself know
how to love.

Help me to see my real needs
which are concealed from me.

I do not ask either a cross
or a consolation;

I can only wait for you.

My heart is open to you.

Visit and help me;

Cast me down and raise me up.

I worship in silence your holy will
and your inscrutable ways.

I offer myself as a sacrifice to you.

I put all my trust in you.

I have no desire other than
to fulfill your will.

Teach me how to pray.

Do you pray yourself in me.

Amen

Philaret of Moscow

In Christ,

