

Amos 7.7-17

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb-line.' Then the Lord said, 'See, I am setting a plumb-line

in the midst of my people Israel;

I will never again pass them by;

the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,

and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,

and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.'

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.

For thus Amos has said,

"Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land." '

And Amaziah said to Amos, 'O seer, 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.'

Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel." 'Now therefore hear the word of the Lord.

You say, "Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac."

Therefore, thus says the Lord :

"Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city,

and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,

and your land shall be parcelled out by line;

you yourself shall die in an unclean land,

and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land." '

Luke 10.25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

SERMON

The meaning or sense of the word 'Samaritan' has had a very long period of development and change. Once upon a time, say around seven hundred years before Jesus was born, a Samaritan was just somebody who lived in Samaria; so it referred to a geographical destination.

Samaria referred to the area in between Judea and Galilee; north of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and south of Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee.

Then around five or six hundred years before Jesus, the Judeans began to discriminate between themselves and the Samaritans. They were seen as similar but different, not quite the same as the good Jewish folks.

Then came the Exile, when Israel was defeated by Babylon and many people were taken away to live in exile in around the year 586 before Christ.

After they had returned, about fifty years later, the Judeans denounced their Samaritan neighbours as being the wrong sort, with the wrong worship, the wrong theology and the wrong behaviour.

So during Jesus' lifetime, Samaritans were viewed as outsiders, foreigners, not proper Jews at all.

The two groups of people did not like each other one bit and feuded for years; rather like, perhaps, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims in Iran.

Jesus initiated a re-evaluation of Samaritan people, demonstrating that they might perhaps love God and their neighbour across the traditional boundaries- so they might be all right after all!

Much later, maybe not until the mid-1600s, the word or name 'Samaritan' had a real evolution, coming to mean anyone- not necessarily an outsider- who rescues people in need. This is the meaning it has for most people today.

What was a shocking surprise in Jesus' day has become the word's only meaning: a Good Samaritan is someone who comes to the aid of a person or people who are in need.

The parable, like the word, has suffered from over-familiarity- it's too well known. But it isn't about helping people: it is about Jesus' major re-evaluation of Israel's boundary-markers.

The law expert quoted the central Jewish prayer: love God and love your neighbour. The parable Jesus told redefines 'neighbour'; and it doesn't conclude that the man in need was the Samaritan's neighbour, but that the Samaritan was his. The challenge is not just to copy the Samaritan, but to recognise him when he comes to **our** aid.

The dark side of the story is that the priest and the Levite turned out not to be neighbours after all. They were so interested in protecting their own status that they could not see what that status- being the official representatives of the people of God- was all about, and so were actually jeopardising it.

Amos was attacked by a priest, who was a true ancestor of Jesus' anonymous passers-by, but in this instance the priest couldn't see that it was the nation as a whole that was lying half dead in a ditch, needing to be stirred into life by Amos's words.

When God declares that Israel doesn't measure up, and the prophet who passes the message on is labelled a conspirator, the only possible answer is condemnation.

Amos was an ordinary man who was given the extraordinary task of declaring God's judgement on those with power. He told them that God's patience had come to an end, and the people of Israel would be defeated in battle and exiled to Babylon. And why was God so fed up with them? Because their society claimed to have divine favour but lived off the backs of the poor. They were unjust and wouldn't change.

Martin Luther King quoted from Amos in speeches and sermons, proclaiming "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

He saw that American racism was- and still is- rooted in a political economy indifferent to the poor, and so the political community and the faith community had to die and be born again. God's justice will not tolerate a moral economy of exploitation and misery.

Recent history in the United States shows that this is still a racially divided community, still discriminating against people of colour and still oppressing the poor. Adding readily available guns into the mix is a recipe for the disaster we are witnessing.

But before we smugly reflect that thank goodness, Australia isn't like that, we must remember that this country also has a record of discrimination and violence.

This NAIDOC week has reminded us that the First Peoples of Australia were treated appallingly, classed as flora and fauna, and are still suffering the long-term effects of trauma and dispossession, in common with others whose countries were colonised.

Who is my neighbour? Jesus shocked the hearers of his day by including people who were beyond the pale. Samaritans, Romans, tax-collectors, prostitutes- he insisted that they were all welcome in the kingdom.

Who is my neighbour today? Is there anyone who might be a modern-day Samaritan for me?

Our neighbours include that scruffy family with unruly children that lives over the road; the newly-arrived migrants who speak English with difficulty; the indigenous youngsters who roam around at night; the asylum-seekers who would much rather go home- if their homes had not been flattened by bombs.

We need to pray for those in government that they will learn that God's way is the way of justice, kindness and compassion. Supporting the rich, turning a blind eye to wealthy tax-avoiders whilst cutting funding for people seeking asylum, health, aged-care, education and pensioners' benefits- these are signs of an unjust society.

We must also pray for ourselves in the church, that we will never forget that our way and our purpose is to love God, which is to love neighbour, which is to love God.

The Lord be with you.