



The New Shofar

November 12th 2017 – Ordinary Sunday 32

Amos 5:18-24 - Matthew 25:1-13

Your sins will always come back and bite you

Amos, the first of the classic Hebrew prophets warned the people over and over again that they cannot sin and expect to avoid all consequences associated with breaking the Covenant God had made with them. Just because they *seem* to get away with sinning does not mean they have no suffering coming their way. To sin is to break their relationship with God and to do what Adam and Eve did – try and create a different world and that has never produced anything but chaos, pain and sorrow.

In his preaching and teaching Amos put an enormous amount of energy into setting down the social sins of the nation. For him, there is an intimate link between the relationship they had with their “neighbour” and their relationship with God. To ignore the poor and the suffering in their midst means they are turning their backs on God, for God has a special relationship with those “little ones”. He speaks of the futility of acts of worship from people who do not show compassion and do not embrace those who are suffering. This is distressing Yahweh God... *Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them!* This is uncompromising language... *I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

How might we assess and speak to our own parish communities if we were to act as Amos today? Where might we be failing? What might today's Amos suggest we start doing?

Israel - an enemy of God?

Today's reading comes in the midst of a prophesy of Amos that speaks of a future time when God would achieve a decisive victory against his enemies. The problem here is the way Israel is presuming that God's enemies were the same as her own enemies and on *that day*, they would be rejoicing. What the prophet warns them is how they have turned themselves into God's enemies... *The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day, says the Lord GOD.* What a shock that must have been for the people! So sure of their righteousness, so confident they were doing the will of God and living according to the commandments! Now they hear from the prophet sent by God how their prayers and their Temple hymns will all be turned into funeral songs.

Using a particular prophetic form of literary construction that negates one thing in order to highlight something else, Amos is highly critical of Jewish religious life. He does not deny the importance of cult and worship for it is a fundamental part of the covenant life of the Hebrew peoples. What he is doing is stressing the centrality of *righteousness*. As our reading ends... *Take away from me the noise of your songs ... But, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

When it comes to God, don't presume! Amos makes very clear to the people the dangers of presuming our relationship with God is alright, is good enough. We will never be close enough to God and never reach the time when we can sit down and rest, for responsibilities endure. We are warned to think our Sunday worship is primary and the main thing God is looking for when we come to judgment.

As Christians, how do we see the relationship between God's demands for worship and the commands of Christ to initiate love acts towards others? What are our social responsibilities?

The Kingdom of Heaven is like...

Today's Gospel of the Ten Bridegrooms is crucial to our understanding of key elements for our own mission and ministries. A careful reading will illustrate the way the Kingdom of God is not being likened to the ten maidens but rather to all that happens to them. It is not the women themselves who are the focus of the story, for the Kingdom is being likened to their actions, or as in the case of some of them, with their failures. When the Groom does appear, some are prepared and others are not. That is the point of comparison between the parable and the Kingdom and herein lies Matthew's fundamental message. It is not to be read as a story about ethical living. It is a parable about Jesus and his return as Messiah. The word *foolish* is going to be applied to those who reject Jesus' call to be engaged in their call to righteousness and faithfulness to the Gospel, while the *wise* are those who hear the command and put their energies into preparing for the Return. Being named "bridesmaid" is not enough.

God's ways may well not be our ways – get used to it!

This is the only place in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) where the reason is given for them thinking of bringing extra oil – in case the groom is late in coming. They were not going to be caught unprepared. They recognize how the wedding day (*the Return*) is in the hands of God and their responsibility is to be ready at all times. The *foolish maidens* however, were the opposite. They desired to be there when the groom turned up but did not take into account the possibility of him being delayed. They had prepared for his immediate return to the house. Their focus was on their own sense of timing – "he will not be late" and had no alternative plans. They were absolutely convinced they knew the mind of God. We are not told specifically what the meaning of this oil may be in terms of ethical living but that is not important in the parable as being told by Jesus. Matthew is content to stress the theme of preparedness and the tragic results that come about when this is not carried out.

What are some of the ways we might be guilty of misreading God and His divine plans? What are some of the ways we need to be preparing for the End in our own lifetime? Do we even think about it? What is the "oil" Christ will be looking for when he returns?

We were invited and so let us in!

Modern Christianity can be very good at lightly skipping over these kinds of teachings. Heavily influenced by the "me" philosophy that permeates so much of our lives, we so easily reach the position where we prefer to believe that when it comes to any kind of judgment, God will accept us as we are – no matter what. This parable begs to differ. More is required than just membership. There is more needed than actually turning up. The foolish maids eventually arrived but were not allowed in. They

had been invited, had accepted and had even shown great commitment in knocking on village doors at midnight in order to buy some oil. They were eager to participate and to rejoice with the Groom but ended up hearing those shocking words...*I don't know you...I don't want anything to do with you...!* They were left in the darkness because they were not watchful and so were not prepared when the master came. From his perspective the Groom was not late, he was only late from the perspective of those invited to join the party. Jesus commands his disciples to *keep alert* which has the sense of a continuous action into the future. What we need to be doing, to keep on doing and to be found doing at The End. As we do not know the time, we do not know how much "oil" is enough. There is no reaching the point where we can sit back and declare that we now have done enough, can rest and leave God's mission to others.

How would we explain the "sin" of the foolish bridegrooms and how might it apply to our own spiritual lives and that of our faith community today? Who will be locked out of the Kingdom when Jesus returns? What is the "oil" we need to gain entry to eternal life? Who is not going to be among those welcomed into eternal life – who are today's foolish virgins?