



THE NEW SHOFAR

God wants to overwhelm us with grace

Never presume God is content with all we do

Ordinary Sunday 25

“I shall never forget any of their deeds”, says the Lord God

In the previous chapter of Amos there are three visions and a dreadful warning of approaching judgment by the hand of God. Israel, says the prophet, is doomed. It will cease to exist and be torn apart in the most brutal of ways. **Chapter 8** begins with a fourth vision...*the end has come upon my people Israel... I shall spare them no longer.* The Hebrew text uses the phrase *the time is ripe* rather than *the end has come* as those words place an emphasis on the process of decay taking place within the ripened fruit. What is coming is inevitable because of the way the people have been living and acting. The focus is on *the end*, the finality of this judgment. We should not attempt to water down the force of these words. God declares there will be no more forgiveness for Israel!

You shall be holy because I the Lord am holy

In Leviticus chapter 11, God declares to Israel...*consecrate yourself to holiness because I am holy.* This is the key ethical teaching dominating both biblical testaments. The reason why believers are called upon to be *holy* is because *God is holy*. Living as men and women in the world we are called upon to “be as God” in our relationship with others and in the way we live in creation. We are all created in the image and likeness of God and so when we relate to other people in the world around us, our actions must be in the manner in which God deals with us. Even before the coming of Jesus, the people were urged to go back to the time of creation. What we find revealed there are the things God expects of all men and all women – to be in creation as God is in creation.

Amos ministered in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. It was a time of relative peace and prosperity in both Israel and Judah. Some of the people enjoyed great wealth, but the majority of others experienced crushing poverty. The poor were oppressed, cheated, and exploited. Their rights were ignored. Immorality of every kind was openly and unashamedly practiced. Drunkenness, adultery, licentiousness, and self-indulgence had rotted the moral fibre of the nation. How could they bring light to the world if they were no different to the very people they were sent to serve?

The people were oozing, dripping with religion of a kind

I found this quote in an old book by a scholar named Paterson and it well reflects the state of the nation before it was destroyed by the Assyrians. There is a further observation made about Israel...*her trouble was not a lack of religion, but an excess of it. As aspirins comfort the man with a toothache, sacrificial worship was a palliative, not removing the evil, but numbing the awareness, a magic drug of which, the efficacy was automatic.* The nation had become so focussed on the acts of worship and the form of worship, they had lost sight of God, the God who must be central to all. This was the fundamental message of the prophet: start with a right relationship with God, by living as God demands of us and as God has instructed and only then worship Him.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

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Of course, Amos' teaching and ministry were not popular. He was not interested in the latest popular opinion or the current trends in morality and human behaviour. He launched into those who spent so much of their time in pursuit of material wealth and wellbeing, who strive so much to line themselves up alongside of the famous and the influential that they were blind to the "poor", those who struggle and are enslaved by human weaknesses and sin, who are victims of the power and authority of others.

Voltaire spoke in the way of Amos when he wrote of the dangers of feeling comfortable and safe because of material prosperity, living in a world where *the superfluous had become a very necessary thing*. In the Book of Judges we find an insight into his own world, a world very much like our own today... *In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes* (21:25). Take God out of the centre of all things, remove the divine core from human living and we end up in chaos. Our contemporary debates over human sexuality, abortion, refugees, same sex marriage, human freedom, rights and the poor and homeless all around us are so often driven by personal views rather than any kind of moral norm, or moral covenant with God.

Jesus warns us: You cannot serve God and mammon

Mammon in the Bible should not be translated as *wealth* or *money*. It also includes those things but it is for more dangerous. In some religions in the Ancient world *Mammon* was personified as a god (as it is today in some video games – Dungeons and Dragons). It had a life and a power of its own and was responsible for the downfall of individuals and even nations. Its greatest power is to lure people away from God, little by little. *Mammon* seeks to dominate a person's heart and mind so that there is less time available for the love and service of God. He is the personification of greed and lust, powerful human temptations that take us far from the Kingdom of God. Without living Christ-like lives, *Mammon* can creep up on a person and before they know it, their life with God has become routine, measured in terms of Sunday worship more than being *salt, light* and *leaven* in the world.

Part of the power of *Mammon* is the way he can convince people that he does not exist. Without the eyes of faith, people become so attuned to the ways of the unbelieving world, not noting how it is *Mammon* guiding, rewarding and leading them in setting priorities and in deciding what is right and what is wrong.

Biblical *Mammon* is generally presented as offering us "enduring gifts" that are God's alone to give – meaning and purpose in life, peace, happiness, security, significance, identity, self-esteem, power, life beyond death and so on. We become afraid when we do not have these things and so put our heads down and build them for ourselves. We are told we can never have enough of these things and so we become afraid when we see others enjoying them and we remain without.

Paul says it well in **Second Corinthians 9:8**... *And God can give you more blessings than you need, and you will always have plenty of everything. He will make you overflow with abundance in every good thing you do*. Today's Gospel, like the prophesy of Amos is not about the evils associated with money and wealth. We generally accumulate those things by the use of the gifts God has given to us as individuals. The central focus of these readings needs to bring us back to pondering the place God, in and through Jesus Christ, has in our daily living, in what we do and say in our little parts of creation. We are to move away from religion and focus instead on how we use our gifts to bring the Kingdom of God alive for others.

With God central in our lives, we will find we have an abundance of blessings, all we need to be fully human as we were created to be. Those blessings are free when we imitate Christ and they then flow over into all we do and it is these *blessings* that enable us to transform the world.

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