

Re-membling the cross

When you are in a relationship with somebody it's always a good idea to know what makes them angry: what riles them, winds them up, gets under their skin. And that is especially true with God, and it's something that the people of Israel discovered to their cost. They discovered that there were two things that really stoked the divine wrath – and it happens that we find them both in our reading from Amos this morning. Because make no mistake: in this passage God is angry. Steam rises from the page as we read these verses, and the first cause of this anger is injustice. God hates that. God hates it when the poor are sold down the river and when scales are doctored to rip off the needy. And the other thing that provokes God's anger is when religion does not engage with life: when religion is bubble-wrapped and insulated from the nitty-gritty of everyday living. So people observe holy days and they go to church and they sing hymns and it makes not the slightest bit of difference to how they live the rest of the time. God hates that. Worship in a vacuum. Worship that goes through the motions.

And God is angry therefore in our passage from the Book of Amos because the people of Israel are very good indeed at religion. They are very observant. The 8th century BC when the prophet Amos was prophesying was a time of peace and prosperity. It was a period of stability and many people were doing very nicely. And religion came easy and was thriving: the holy days, the pilgrimages, the festivals were all flourishing. But while all that went on there were many people checking their watches, counting the hours until they could get back to work. And back at work they would be selling grain at inflated prices, and mixing in the sweepings from the floor, and tilting the scales and giving short measure and the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. It was the kind of situation which gives Karl Marx credence – religion as a tool in the hands of the powerful to further their own interests at the expense of the poor; religion as an opiate which numbs and anaesthetises the poor so that they put with it all. Well, Marx underestimated God's anger. Nowadays we seem to have a problem with the idea of an angry God. We want God to be endlessly patient and affirming of everything. But what kind of God is that? If God is not angry at injustice then there is no reason for us to be - and the world goes on its way and nothing ever changes. And so we have this

reading with its image of a bowl of ripe fruit, signifying that Israel is ripe for God's judgement. And Israel's well-oiled religious machine will be disrupted – the sweet songs rising from temple worship will become wailings and feasts and festivals will become funeral wakes for this situation is unsustainable.

One of the interesting things that I want us to notice here in this passage is the way in which the world is presented in a very holistic, inter-connected way – and I'll explain what I mean. You see, people here are practicing economic injustice, fraudulent practices which are having dire social effects. There is developing in Israel precisely in this time of prosperity a growing under-class of the poor and the dispossessed and a society where that happens is heading for trouble. It has cracks running through it and is sure to collapse. But the effects of such wrong doing lead everywhere. For example, if we had read on in this chapter we would have found that verse 8 speaks of the land trembling; and if we had read still further we would have found Amos prophesying that the sun would go down at noon and the earth would be darkened. In other words all creation is affected by Israel's wrongdoing. Creation is all of a piece and where humans live out of sync with one another everything is out of sync. And so it is today that our insane and rapacious greed results in bitter divisions between haves and have-nots, and that fuels conflicts. But the effects go much further. The animal world is impacted by our way of life as species are extinguished. And our unsustainable life-style must have something to do with the rise in global temperatures, even if there are other factors at work too. So sea temperatures rise and coral reefs are destroyed and species die, for creation is all of a piece. All created things are interconnected and one imbalance creates another.

And note that this passage makes reference to Sabbaths in verse 5. People were apparently checking the clock and saying 'when will the Sabbath be over so that we can get back to our rackets?' That implies that the Sabbath was not exactly being taken seriously and that is significant for the Sabbath was a way of rebalancing creation, of setting it back to rights. So, Sabbath principles laid down that every seventh day people should rest – as also should their servants and their animals for all God's creatures are inter-connected and inter-dependent. But the Sabbath was more than just a weekly occasion. Every seventh year was a sabbatical year when the land was to lie fallow so that it got a rest – for creation is all of a piece, and exploiting the land would have unforeseen consequences. And the Sabbath included mechanisms for releasing

people from debt. Every seventh year in Israel people were supposed to be released from debt, their debts written off to prevent them being trapped in poverty – can you imagine that? There's good news for the poor for you - and not such good news for the rich. And the institution of the Sabbath went further with legislation that involved the periodical restoring of land that had been sold to its original owner, an intervention designed to prevent the rich from accumulating more and more at the expense of the poor. In other words the Sabbath was an institution that recognised the way all creation is interconnected and inter-rated and it was a mechanism for re-booting creation every so often to restore it back to balance and equilibrium. But clearly it wasn't working in Israel and the evidence is that it never did. And if you were as puzzled as most people are by that strange story that Jesus told in our reading from Luke's Gospel this morning, about the steward who went around cancelling everyone's debts when he found himself in trouble, well maybe this at least partly explains his behaviour. The man was practicing Sabbath principles of debt cancellation – albeit to save his own skin.

So Amos speaks to us today in our forlorn world where we truly wonder how the planet can be saved. And what do we as Christians have to offer? Well let me give you an image to hold on to. Rev George McLeod, who was the founder of the Iona Community in Scotland, used a most graphic image to describe how we manage to separate our relationship with God from our relationship with everything else. He took the cross with its vertical beam and its horizontal beam. And he suggested that the vertical beam symbolises our relationship with God, what we call the transcendent, our calling to be sons and daughters of the living God. But then there is also the horizontal beam of the cross which symbolises our relationships with one another, and with nature and with the whole created order, our calling to be brothers and sisters to all. And McLeod warned of what he called 'dismembering the cross', separating the vertical and horizontal dimensions. So when Jesus died on the cross he was restoring our relationship with God from whom we have become alienated and estranged. But on the cross Jesus was also dying to restore our 'horizontal' relationships with one another and with creation from which we have also become estranged. So there is that fantastic, climactic verse in Paul's letter to the Colossians in the New Testament, where we read that through Jesus Christ 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

That is the cosmic scope of the cross. There Christ was reconciling us to God, but he was also reconciling us to one another. As well as giving us peace with God he was creating a platform for just and peaceable relationships between human beings, and between us and the created world of which we are a part. And beware of dismembering the cross, separating the vertical beam from the horizontal, making religion all about our relationship with God and forgetting the horizontal dimension. It's what the people in Amos' day were doing when they asked when the festivals would be over so they could get back to selling grain at inflated prices on false balances. It's what Islamic jihadis are doing when they shout 'God is great' as they detonate their bombs and fly aircraft into buildings and commit their atrocities. But it's what Christians do too when they think they can divorce their relationship with God from their relationship with other people; or when they think they can divorce their faith from politics because faith is only concerned with 'the soul'; or when we think we can separate our relationship with God from the choices we make about how we eat and what we buy and how we impact the environment. In Christ God and creation are all of a piece. Inseparable. And we are called to remember the cross: to re-member that which is in danger of becoming dismembered.

Thinking on these things here in this city reminded me that that this coming Wednesday, September 21st, is the twentieth anniversary of the death of a Dutch priest by the name of Henri Nouwen, author of many books on faith and spirituality. Nouwen had a distinguished career teaching in several of the great American universities. He was a very popular author, writing profoundly about the spiritual life, and yet he was a deeply restless and troubled soul, prone to depression and struggling with his sexuality. Towards the end of his life, however, he made a move, turning his back on academia and joining a L'Arche community, one of a network of Christian communities which include the severely disabled. There Nouwen was assigned to one young man called Adam who he cared for completely – dressing and washing and toileting him. At first he found this very difficult, but it was the making of him. Here, in this community and with Adam Henri Nouwen at last came home and found the peace for which he had been searching for so long. As he wrote after Adam's death and not long before his own, 'Adam gave me the home I had been yearning for; not just a home with good people but a home in my own body, in the body of my community, in the body of the church, yes, in the body of God'.

In other words, in this relationship with Adam divine love and human love – love of God, love of self, love of others – came together as the cross was remembered. And so too may it be in our lives. Amen.

O loving God,
We pray today for a fairer, more just world.
We pray for countries where government
is thwarted by corruption,
where money is misappropriated,
where those in power serve their own interests
rather than the common good...
We pray for countries saddled with massive debt,
and where interest payments alone drain
the economy and reinforce poverty and destitution.
We pray that the powerful economies of the world
will look not only to their own interests
but to the interests of all...

And God we pray for a world where huge budgets and resources are always available for the arms industry: teach us we pray to turn swords into ploughshares and missiles into hospitals and literacy programmes.

We remember again this morning the conflict in Syria, praying that the ceasefire will hold and that a way to peace will be found...

And we pray for your church, called to be a people that brings hope to the world. Renew and refresh our worship that it may honour you, but may worship go hand in hand with love of neighbour and care for creation and the treasuring of all created things.

Lastly, we pray today for any in special need to day, for any who come here this morning with fears or anxieties or sorrow in their hearts.

We pray for those from our fellowship in hospital, the housebound and those in care homes, those who have members of their family facing operations or recovering from them. Give strength and healing we pray...

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.