

AMOS

One of the greatest story-tellers was the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen. One of the tales he told was about "The Emperor's New Clothes". It's about a king who loved dressing up and two swindlers who posed as weavers and promised to make the king, for a price, a wonderful suit of clothes, such as had not been seen before. The only thing about this new suit was that it could only be seen by the clever and the wise. To anybody not fit for office, or stupid or ignorant, the new suit would be invisible.

And everyone, the Emperor's ministers, his top officials, even the Emperor himself was taken in. Who wanted to appear stupid or incompetent? So they all went along with the lie, saying the new suit was so colourful, such a wonderful design, such a superb fit. But in fact, there were no new clothes – in fact no clothes at all! It was all a lie, all a spin, for which the so-called weavers were paid a handsome sum.

A great procession was organised for the Emperor to show off his new clothes. And everyone went along with the pretence. Again who wanted to appear stupid – except a small boy who blurted out, truthfully and honestly, that the king was "in his altogether, as naked as the day that he was born!" And everyone had to agree that the little boy was right. The young boy saw it as it really was.

A prophet has been described as someone who sees the present with x-ray vision – a person who sees things as they really are and honestly and truthfully proclaims it without fear or favour. A prophet is a person who sees through falsehood and pretence and can tell spin from truth.

A prophet today would have his head turned!

This description fits Amos. This morning's first reading was a very short example of his fearless preaching.

Not only did Amos see with x-ray vision what was going on in the Israel of his day. He also cut to the heart of the matter with surgical precision.

And it took a lot of courage to do it – who wants to be out of step with the crowd? Who wants to shout out that the Emperor has no clothes on?

At the time of Amos, Israel was enjoying a time of peace and prosperity. It was a time of great affluence. Trade and commerce were yielding big profits, and those in control, on the top of the heap, were living in ease and luxury. Religious festivals and ceremonies were lavish.

But the x-ray eyes of Amos detected that underneath the shining, glossy exterior, things were far from well. There was a dark and dirty underbelly.

While the rich got richer, the poor got poorer. As we heard in our reading, the poor were being trampled on, their land was confiscated.

There was sharp and dishonest business practices – merchants were falsifying weights and values – and when they got into debt the poor were sold as slaves.

Amos told it as it was. He condemned those who profited from the exploitation and suffering of others. In a previous chapter he tells them, "You trample on the poor and take levies for grain. You who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe and push aside the needy in the gate."

He condemns the hypocrisy of their worship which doesn't affect the way they live. They can't wait for the Sabbath to be over so that they can start cheating again. So God says, "I hate and

despise your festivals. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them,” and then comes what God really wants from his people,

“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

In other words, worship should not only make us *feel* good, but also make us *be* good and *do* good.

Amos recognises that this is not a popular thing to say. In another part of his book, he says that “the prudent will keep silent in such a time”, but he declares he cannot keep silent, he cannot keep up any pretence, no matter how dangerous it may be for him personally. He vows to speak the truth, the unvarnished truth, come what may.

Amos, the prophet with x-ray vision who told it as it was.

And what about today?

A modern prophet with x-ray vision has said that in our time we are suffering from Truth Decay. It's hard to know what - or who – to believe. There's so much spin, so much “fake news”, so little regard for truth. Mark Oakley, the poet and theologian (and a speaker at the preaching conference that Nathan & I were at) has put it like this:-

“In the times we live in today
Truth is less important than opinion
Impact is more important than honesty
To be interesting is more important than to be right
Lying is just a laugh and
Dishonest simplicity is preferred to honest complexity”

He bemoans the cynical use of language by leaders today. Trump, he says, “campaigns in graffiti and governs in tweets....fake news detracts from fake politicians” And he quotes George Orwell who warned that totalitarian rule takes hold by slow injections of falsity that people begin to repeat as truth, and by repetition begin to believe – like the so-called wise and powerful in Hans Christian Andersen's tale about the Emperor's new clothes.

Pontius Pilate once cynically asked Jesus, ‘What is truth?’ and we might do the same today. The warning has been given, “If we don't stand for something we are in danger of falling for anything!”

What would Amos make of today?

What would his x-ray vision see in our society?

He would want us not only to feel good, but to be good and go out and do good. He would surely say to us as he did to the people of his day, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.” He would question a society which neglects the most vulnerable.

In one of his vivid sermons he tells the people that God is holding a plumb line against their actions to see whether they are true or whether they have strayed from what was right. Justice, truth and integrity matter to God.

Let me end with a couple of quotations. The first from Mahatma Gandhi, “Even if you are in a minority of one, the truth is the truth.” And surely that's the moral of the Emperor's non-existent new suit.

The second is from Leo Tolstoy of War & Peace fame (no I haven't managed to read it!), "Wrong does not cease to be wrong because the majority share it."

And the third from Jesus who said, "For this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. For the truth will make you free."

In these troubled and uncertain times let us put our own plumb line against what we hear. Let us like Amos look for the truth, like the little boy, speak the truth, and as followers of Jesus live the truth.