

Measuring Up

Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

What to preach about this morning? Some of you will know that I follow something that is called the lectionary which suggests four different readings for each Sunday from which to choose: something from the Old Testament, a Psalm, something from the Epistles, and something from a Gospel. It's a three-year rotation of readings and often brings to light passages that might not normally be looked at for sermon material.

I made my selection for today, along with the sermon title, back in December of last year as I plan for around a six month cycle.

Luke's very familiar story about the Good Samaritan has a well-beaten sermon path and crops up frequently. Less so the reading from Amos. I had no idea how apposite it would be.

The prophet Amos writes in the 8th BC, in a time of relative peace and prosperity for Israel, but also a time when God's justice and truth were being neglected by rulers and people alike.

With the image of a plumb line measuring a faulty wall, determining what is true and what is not, the prophet Amos gives a devastating image of a fatal flaw in the structure of the lives of individual and community. Both have come out of 'true' with themselves. God is the Master-builder and the plumbline is God's standard of obedience to God's call for justice and righteousness; for integrity and decency; for truthfulness and compassion and honour.

Such an image of judgement is uncomfortable in our modern world. Sectors of political society promote themselves for being strongly in favour of law and order, with the punishment matching the crime. Yet most become squeamish about God's judgement in political, economic, and personal. One of the legacies of the European Enlightenment was to create a world in which we

were immune from any external judgement other than that, 'which seems personally right to me.' "Who are you to judge me?" is a cry often made in our society. Many when asked why they avoid the church complain, "The Church is too judgemental." Jesus says in His Sermon on the Mount, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgement you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get."ⁱ

That's a warning against judging unfairly and unjustly, and a warning to be cautious when we point an accusing finger. Any of us, all of us who make judgements will be judged.

But that is not, a ban on making judgement on people's behaviour and character; of a Government's honesty and effectiveness; of a country's morality and compassion; of world's acceptance or rejection of injustice and cruelty.

With his image of the plumb line, Amos leaps over the centuries to our day, not only seeing what we see, and what we turn a blind eye to, and calls it out. He focuses on the moral and spiritual condition of individuals, groups, and nations. The function of the prophet is not simply to predict future events, but to warn of the consequences of injustice, deceit, and indifference to the common decencies of life.

A plumb line is a simple yet necessary tool – a weight affixed to the end of a string – and utilized not simply in the construction of a wall – but in the hands of God the construction of human and national character. Reliant upon gravity it gives a true measure of that which is straight, and its usage is crucial if a structure, and human and national character is to be strong and enduring.ⁱⁱ

The events in Westminster in these recent months, and in particular in these last few days, is a time when we should not be afraid to hold the prophetic plumb line against the Prime Minister, his Cabinet, and those who have had difficulty in coming to what has seemed an inevitable judgement on moral, ethical, and judgement failings. The plumb line might also be applied to the

Scottish National Party's lack of response to the allegations of predatory sexual behaviour by one of its MPs, whether or not the police are pressing forward with an investigation. In equally difficult matters, the actions of the United States Supreme Court in relation to the overturning of the Roe versus Wade ruling on abortion, and further US failure to pass significant legislation around gun laws. The plumb line might also be applied to the clear damage Brexit is doing to our nation's economy, and to the treatment of refugees fleeing for their lives to our country. The plumb line must also be applied to the war crimes being perpetrated against Ukraine and its people by Vladimir Putin and the Russian army. The plumb line must be applied to businesses like P&O Ferries who dismissed 800 employees via a three-minute pre-recorded video call with plans to replace them with cheaper workers; where members of staff were told during the call that it was 'their final day of employment', without any consultation or notice.

Some politicians, journalists, business leaders and others get nervous and defensive and angry when people of faith make these kinds of statements. It's nothing new. In the C8th BC that's what Amos faced. God's plumb line calls to account the powerful, the wealthy, the morally indifferent, the financially corrupt, the callously unconcerned, and says to them, "This is not right, this is not just, this is not fair, this is not acceptable."

God's plumb line can be deployed against churches and faith communities, and the individuals within them, when their practice, or behaviour, or attitudes do not measure up to what God hopes for and intends and expects.

No wonder it's uncomfortable. No wonder people get angry. It is no wonder, "...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."ⁱⁱⁱ Not just Boris Johnson, and Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump, and the management of P&O; but you, and me.

When God's plumb line is deployed, it shows up what is unjust, and hypocritical, and plain wrong in human society, and in individual lives. None escapes God's measuring up.

For those who think this is simply one of those harsh judgements only to be found in the pages of the Old Testament, it's right there in the New Testament too. What do you imagine God's plumb line to be measuring up in the parable of the Good Samaritan? On that rocky road down from Jerusalem down to Jericho, where the robbers beat up and left for dead an injured man, and a priest and a Levite walked by on the other side.

But God's plumb line of judgement not only reveals what is crooked and callous and cruel and corrupt. It also shows what is true, and compassionate, and kindly, and filled with love. In Jesus' parable, when you measure up the Good Samaritan, when you hold God's plumb line of judgement – you see what a human being, what a community, what a country, a church, a whole world *can* be. *Should* be. *Must* be. *Will* be.

In our day we tend to think of judgement in an exclusively negative way. However God's judgement is part, ironically, of God's grace, and God's love, and indeed God's hope for us. It is God's encouragement and challenge to us to do better and to be better because we choose better.

In modern life most of us want to be left alone, left to our own devices to live our lives as we please, immune from judgements and the consequences of our behaviour. This has been at the heart of the arrogance and indifference and entitlement and narcissism of what we have seen in the Westminster in recent months. I fear it has not entirely gone away, and I know that in all other areas of human existence it has definitely not gone away.

As God measures us up with God's plumb line, we find a God in Old and New Testaments Who does *not* leave us alone. God comes to us and loves us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves,

and that this need not be the way we have to be. Against the pressure of sin and brokenness and wilful bad behaviour, God applies the counterpressure of justice, and judgement, and eventually grace and love for those who make amends and transform.^{iv}

It was said by William Thomson, Lord Kelvin, a mathematician and scientist, that "The true measure of a man is what he would do would he never be caught."

We all get caught. We all get seen. God measures up all of us. But it need not be the end. Jesus came to show us a better way. He showed the possibility of compassion and mercy and love. Then He called each one of us to go and do likewise.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Matthew 7:1-2

ⁱⁱ John E White, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, p221

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 3:23

^{iv} William H Willimon, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, p222