

Justice on the move

Amos 5:18-24; Matthew 12:1-13

On August 28, 1963, Dr Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous speech, "I Have a Dream." During the middle of the American civil rights movement this speech emphasized the optimism and hope that many activists held for the future. King quoted the prophet Amos in this context:

"No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"

What do we know about the prophet Amos from 7th BC? He was probably a shepherd. He says of himself he wasn't a prophet, or a prophet's son. He felt moved, seeing the world around him, to speak out about social justice because of a passionate concern for those oppressed by poverty and ignored by a wealthy elite. He was appalled by those whose religion was but lip-service to God, and who despised meaningless festivals and religious services. Who ignored or misunderstood what God required from God's people surrounded by the reality of an unjust world, riven by self-serving tribalism and corruption. Worship is not a way to pass the time or provide entertainment. Worship is about respecting God and honouring God by attending to the sick suffering unaided and the poor starving unheeded and unclothed. Worship without action is meaningless. Worship without meaning behind it is pointless. God commands us to practise justice so that God's kingdom of peace and welcome and inclusion and honesty and simple fairness is a reality not in the future but right now.

Maybe Amos has something to say to the times we live in today. On a day when we remember not only World Wars but all war, our focus is not, nor ever, on the glorification of war. The pity of war, maybe. The shame of war, maybe. We look at the desert that is the Gaza strip, and its bombed

hospitals, and unsafe tented camps. We look at photographs of young and old from Southern Israel taken hostage weeks ago and held, alive we pray, in some hidden place. We look at the forgotten crises of Ukraine, and Sudan/South Sudan, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Ethiopia, Haiti, Syria. How many more names on War memorials like the ones in this Church do we need before the world, the whole world, realises that hard-worked-at peace, constantly nurtured, generously resourced, is the only answer. We live, yet again, at a moment of truth. History will judge Hamas, the Israeli Defence Force, and the whole world standing by for what is being done, and what is not being done in Israel-Palestine. What we see in these tribal reactions has caused not simply a humanitarian crisis, but a crisis of humanity. The prophet Amos tells us God is not interested in platitudes, but in action for justice for all. In Israel-Palestine, in a land called holy, these unholy atrocities on every side, solve nothing, disgust God, and should disgust all the people of God, Jewish, Christian and Muslim.

"...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

It may we feel there is little we can do to resolve those age-long issues in those far-away places, so what about nearer home? There are inequalities and injustices that are an affront to God here. The cost-of-living crisis has not **caused** but **underlined** ongoing injustices in our country that have been present for generations.

Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin in the Fields, wrote a few days ago:

Homelessness is a lifestyle choice. It's a lifestyle choice made not by people experiencing homelessness themselves, but by a whole society that chooses not to invest in housing, that chooses to divert resources away from mental health, that tolerates pitiful outcomes for those who grow up in care, that underinvests in addiction recovery, that fails to recognise the energy and initiative migrants can bring, that ostracises, demeans, humiliates others, and that insists on only facing problems when they've got to the point they're extremely difficult to address.

Homelessness is society's lifestyle choice. It's only an individual's choice when shame, exclusion, isolation and humiliation are better than the alternatives; in other words when the alternatives are continued violence in the home, silent hidden misery, or genuine physical or psychological danger. Which hardly counts as a choice...Remembrance weekend is a time for recalling those who have given their lives for the freedoms we today enjoy. The best way to give thanks for their sacrifice, besides our solemn commemorations, is to build a society worthy of the sacrifice they made...The best test of the virtue of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. I wonder how you feel our society is measuring up to that test right now?

Amos said: *"...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

After reading the prophet's words, drilling down into the depths of Scripture's rhetoric, explaining the ways we might be implicated by those ancient words from nearly 3,000 years ago, a preacher once concluded, "And that is why this text ruins my day."ⁱⁱ

It ruins our day to see the world in ruins, those bombed out shells of buildings, fields, homes, and human lives that desecrate our news. It ruins our day to see so much need, piling up, and our feeling inadequate in our response. It ruins our day to feel so angry and so helpless and so demoralised.

It ruins our day to hear Jesus' words in that parable about being ready at all times for the unexpected appearance of the Kingdom of God and fearing that we will be amongst the unprepared. Our lamps unlit and hearts and souls unready for God coming back. A God Who will look in anger, and sorrow, at what we have let happen to God's world and God's children.

Spare us the scolding, Amos. Don't condemn us to darkness because we have run out of the oil of human kindness, Jesus. But they need to speak this truth that nobody wants to hear. They need to point out this ugliness that everyone is tip-toeing around. They need to ruffle feathers and stir pots. If the Kingdom of God is to come, we need to be challenged, and we need to get ready.

But there is something more. As much as God expects from us, and as much as God through Amos and Jesus speaks hard truths to us, God still loves us. Justice and righteousness, fairness and action, hopefulness and intention are not luxuries to be relished in good times but are essential elements even in the most desperate of times.

Which is why this Church's Wednesday Club still provides welcome and friendship to people with disability, even though the Council has cut funding for transportation and is only continuing through generous congregational support.

Which is why the Edinburgh Clothing Store, through the Gift Day coming up soon, will provide clothes for a wide range of people in our city.

Which is why our Morningside Hope project still provides support and welcome for people living with dementia and their carers.

Which is why our Baby and Toddler Group still provides a place of meeting and encouragement for infants and their families.

Which is why our Wednesday Coffee morning still provides warmth and friendship each week.

Which is why our Church flowers, going out nearly every Sunday, provide tangible proof that those at home with illness, or frailty or sadness know they are not forgotten.

Which is why the Pad Project charity we support in Africa still provides sanitary products to girls and women.

Which is why our weekly offerings provide the means to maintain and expand the presence of our church for the work of the congregation and the inclusion of our community.

Amos said: *"...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

On this Remembrance Sunday we remember the sacrifice of women and men who lived and died in order that we might have freedom and put that freedom to good use. It is the only way forward,

“to stand under that stream, to drown in it and be reborn, to bathe in it, to strip off our clothe and let it pelt us with the things that can come only from God. Guilt and shame are dead ends.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Stock up lamp oil, our kindness and action, despite the darkness of the night and the endless delay of God’s Kingdom. Dare to be awake, vigilant. Dare to be faithful, hopeful and loving. Then justice will roll down, and the world will become that better place, not only in the future, but right now.

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

Amen

ⁱ Sam Wells, Pastoral Letter, St Martin’s in the Field, 10/11.23

ⁱⁱ Maryann McKibben Dana, Feasting on the Word Year A, Vol 4, p266

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p270