

Over the summer we are going to spend some time studying the book of Amos. As we work through it you'll see that it is amazingly current and relevant in its subject matter. The earthquake mentioned in verse one is also mentioned in Zechariah 14:5 and has been dated around 760 BC.

When we meet somebody new we often ask them for their name, and then what they do. Amos is introduced as a shepherd from Tekoa but he's not like the shepherds in the Christmas story – Amos is a wealthy farmer. He has knowledge of international affairs and is an effective orator using similes, metaphors, repetition to build his message to a climax. He is speaking in a hostile environment – in Ch 7:12-13 he is deported. Why would he do this? Because he was called by God and had to respond to that call.

The days of Kings Uzziah and Jeroboam were days of calm, peace and prosperity. Neither Egypt nor Syria were at war with them and Assyria was led by weak kings who were struggling at home. Amos tells us that the people were enjoying affluence, even being able to afford meat; the women were preoccupied with making sure the drink cabinet was stocked; new houses with expensive ivory decorations were being built and some people had summer and winter houses; business was booming and people were attending worship.

The people felt secure and were looking forward with optimism. Unfortunately storm clouds were gathering and very soon a succession of great empires would rule that part of the world: Assyria was first, followed by Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. It was up to Amos to warn them that the storm was coming and to tell them why.

People in those days would have been familiar with lions and when the word of God came to Amos it was not in the 'still small voice' that Elijah heard but as the mighty roar of a lion. In the preaching and teaching of the church today we tend to favour those biblical pictures of God that are comforting and secure: the caring Shepherd, the nursing mother, or the waiting father. In contrast, we open the book of Amos and discover on the first page that encountering the Lord is like meeting a lion. We find that the first announced acts of this God is trying to ourselves the sending of fires and an earthquake. This picture of God as a roaring lion conveys the ferocity and the wrath of God, whom we have tried to domesticate and tame.

Of real significance is the fact that God does speak. He is not isolated and remote, but as we will see he is at work in the world, even in those nations who do not recognise him or care for his people.

Chapter 1:3-2:16 as the first and longest prophetic speech in the book. It announces seven times that the Lord will send fire to destroy the nations who are Israel's neighbours. "Thus says the Lord" is a well recognised method of sending messages in the ancient world. It reminds that the origin of the message is the sender, not the

messenger, and that the authority behind the message also lies with the sender. The messenger is the ambassador of the higher authority.

The speech follows a set pattern:

**The Lord says....**

**Then a general accusation** in the form of ‘for three crimes, even four....

There is a pattern in the order in which the nations are mentioned – the first three Syria, Gaza and Tyre are traditional enemies. Edom, Ammon and Moab have a kinship relationship with Israel: the Edomites were considered descendants of Esau; Ammon and Moab were descendants of Lot. Judah and Israel had been one nation but had been plagued by conflict between the descendants of Leah and Rachel as far back as Jacob. King Saul was of Benjamin (Rachel) but David was of Judah (Leah) so when he became King the Benjamites rebelled. David won but the conflict continued until Jeroboam led 10 northern tribes to reject Judah and Benjamin leading to the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. To avoid having to mix with the southern tribes Jeroboam instituted a form of calf worship and declared that it was not necessary to go to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship.

Amos is from Judah and you could imagine that the Israelites would be quite happy hearing that judgement was coming to their enemies – even Judah. We are reminded that God is concerned with international politics. God is active in the histories of other nations – even Israel’s worst enemies! Amos tells us that God has worked for the good of those nations in the past (9:7) but he will also punish them for their crimes. The Lord is not a private deity, just for Israel. Nor is he just for us.

**The specific accusations** in the first six sayings all have to do with crimes in war. The Philistines and the people of Tyre have been involved in large-scale programs of deportation. The Edomites are accused of pitiless cruelty against their brothers. The Ammonites are particularly bad, killing pregnant women, taking two lives in one blow. What the ammonites did before birth, the Moabites have done beyond death, burning human bones to make consumer products, in this case for whitewashing walls.

Each time the announcement of punishment involves the Lord sending fire. This seems to be a reference to the fire set by invading armies as part of the techniques of warfare rather than the fire and brimstone that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

Judah’s wrong-doing is described in different terms. They have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes. Judah is judged differently because it has a different relationship to the judge. Judah is part of the whole family of God, who were brought out of Egypt and the Israelites would have been well aware that they too had a special relationship to the judge.

We can be ok listening to judgement being passed on someone else and I suspect the Israelites would have been quite happy up until this point. Judah made it country

number seven and seven is often used in the bible as a sign of completeness. Perhaps they were ready to go for lunch and discuss everything Amos had said.

Then here comes the shocker – “The Lord says....I will not relent from punishing Israel.” He goes straight to the **specific accusation** with seven crimes they have committed.

1. Ordinary citizens who had fallen on hard times were being sold as slaves.
2. The needy were being sold into slavery even although they only owe a very small amount.
3. The poor are oppressed.
4. The poor don't get fair treatment in society, especially in the legal system.
5. Young women are sexually abused.
6. You could pay off a small debt by giving your coat but it had to be returned to you before the cold of the evening (Ex 22:26-27). Here the wealthy are charged with using the coats as picnic blankets.
7. A poor farmer could pay a fine with the wine he produced – that wine was being drunk by those who had more than enough of their own wine.

If the seven sayings against the other nations remind us that God is interested in the happenings of nations then the charge against Israel show us that he is also concerned when legal aid is denied to the poor, when people are sexually abused, or when the systems designed to protect the dignity of the powerless in society are quietly ignored.

These crimes, which take place in an outwardly orderly and civil society, are denounced in the same speech as the war crimes and atrocities of Israel's neighbours. Judgement is coming and even the swift, the strong and the brave will not be able to escape.

This proclamation against Israel contains a reminder of their relationship with God – how he rescued them from Egypt and brought them to this land; how he had raised up prophets but they would not listen.

We find it difficult to get the concept that a whole people would be punished rather than just the 'guilty' – but the thing is we're all guilty of sinning it's just that we categorise some sins as worse than others, but God doesn't. There is no automatic relationship between God and people – we cannot live in persistent disobedience and not expect God to react. God does not have only one attribute. It is true that God is love – he is the Good Shepherd, the nursing mother and the waiting Father but he is also the roaring Lion who sends earthquake and fire.

We need to be very careful about taking words written to a people a very long time ago and applying them to our context. In some ways they still apply to the people living in that area today – in fact, nothing much has changed in nearly three thousand years but God is not less interested in international politics today than he was then.

He is not blind to the atrocities that are being committed and judgement will come to those who perpetrate violence.

So, what do we learn?

1. God is a speaking God and he still speaks today.
2. He causes nations to rise and fall.
3. We need to remember that righteousness and justice are very important to God and we need to involve ourselves in supporting and encouraging the powerless in society.
4. Our equivalent sins today might be:
  - a. The number of people in jail because they can't pay a fine
  - b. People on 0 hours contracts who have no regular income and no rights
  - c. The new benefits system where people can be refused any money for four weeks because they missed an appointment, or where alcoholics and drug addicts are going to be given their monthly money all at once – when we know it won't see out the week, never mind the month
  - d. Changes to legal aid mean that poor people can't afford to go to court
  - e. Where circumstances like the abuse in Rotherham are allowed to continue
5. The church needs to be speaking out about these things but, more than that, we need to make sure we haven't become comfortable and complacent.
6. The Israelites had asked for the word of God to be silenced but we need to call out to God to speak and make himself known in our midst. We need our ministers and elders to be listening to God and to bring his word to us so that we can change our ways and align ourselves with his purposes. My fear is that the church in Scotland has been so busy trying to be all things to all people that it is seen to stand for very little, or that it is 'against' everything. We are called to speak the truth in love – even when that truth is unpalatable. We are called to be faithful to God, even when it costs us.