

Last week we thought about Amos chapter 7. We should remember that these chapters and verses we have in our bibles are artificial breaks. They were designed to help people memorise the bible and be able to find the section that is being read. Sometimes they work well but very often they make us miss connections between points of an argument, or cause a division where there shouldn't be one. It's a bit like that here and I did toy with doing both chapters together but there's enough in both to justify keeping them separate. Last week the issue for the people was that Amos was bringing a message they didn't want to hear. God had told him that he was going to judge his people and showed him a number of visions – locusts, fire and a plumb line but also what we read in the first few verses today: a basket of ripe fruit. What we don't get is that in Hebrew there is a play on words through the sound of two words *qais* means 'end of season summer fruit' while *qes* means 'end' but they sound very similar.

The point was that Israel was ripe and ready to be judged because the end was coming. The joyful songs of harvest would be replaced by wailing.

Vs 4-7 Amos again outlines some of Israel's sins: especially the sins of injustice and oppression. The wealthy were only interested in increasing their wealth and they didn't care how they did it. We need to be careful in taking these words that were written to God's people centuries ago and applying them to our nation but we can get general principles – God brings judgement to nations and that is based on a number of things:

- what do they know about him, and what do they do with that knowledge;
- do leaders lead with integrity
- is commercial practice fair and open
- how do they treat the poor and destitute

V 8-10 The Lord announces his judgement on Israel. The land will tremble – either an actual earthquake or a metaphorical one where the nation is 'shaken' and destroyed. The sun will go down at noon – either an actual eclipse or a metaphorical eclipse of the nation.

Then God will send a spiritual famine through the land when the people will seek a word from God in the same way that starving people seek food and water. They will cry out for a word of hope and guidance but there will be none. Think how important hearing from God had been in their past: Abraham was called by God; Isaac and Jacob followed God; Joseph was able to interpret dreams with God's help; Moses spoke with God and gave them the 10 Commandments; Moses spent time with God and then brought God's instruction to the people; Joshua followed God; Samuel was called by God and through him the first kings were chosen. In theory at least the word of God was vital to the Israelites in the religious and political realms.

HOSEA 4:6 *My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.*

*“Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also reject you as my priests;
because you have ignored the law of your God,
I also will ignore your children.*

Isaiah 30:9-14 *For these are rebellious people, deceitful children,
children unwilling to listen to the Lord’s instruction.*

10

*They say to the seers,
“See no more visions!”
and to the prophets,
“Give us no more visions of what is right!
Tell us pleasant things,
prophecy illusions.*

11

*Leave this way,
get off this path,
and stop confronting us
with the Holy One of Israel!”*

12 *Therefore this is what the Holy One of Israel says:*

*“Because you have rejected this message,
relied on oppression
and depended on deceit,*

13

*this sin will become for you
like a high wall, cracked and bulging,
that collapses suddenly, in an instant.*

14

*It will break in pieces like pottery,
shattered so mercilessly
that among its pieces not a fragment will be found
for taking coals from a hearth
or scooping water out of a cistern.”*

II TIMOTHY 4:2-3 *Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season;
correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. 3 For
the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit
their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say
what their itching ears want to hear.*

Matthew 4:4 *Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: “It takes more than bread to
stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God’s mouth.”*

In the West we have never had so much access to God's word – there have never been so many translations, or so many ways to access a bible

Video clip

You might think that people who don't go to church shouldn't be expected to know anything about the bible and unless someone tells them that's a reasonable argument. But what about church people? Could there be a famine of the word in our churches? I want to suggest that is perfectly possible. A few months ago the C of S website featured a video of a minister who stated that the idea of Jesus dying for sin was old fashioned and for a different time and now we simply need inner renewal – well, we certainly do need inner renewal but that renewal comes through faith in Christ. When we come to him in faith we receive forgiveness and new life. 1 Corinthians 15: 3 *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures*

So if our spiritual leaders are teaching things that are not true how can Christians know what is true? With such easy access to bibles you might have thought that people in the pews would be able to say, "Hang on, you've said this but the bible says that". But in order for that to happen they would need to know what the bible says – which would mean they had spent time reading it and getting to know it. The thing is the more time you spend reading and studying the bible the greater your hunger for God.

The thing is though that most of us don't actually spend much time reading the bible.

So if it's not being taught, and it's not being read it seems reasonable to suggest that a spiritual famine in our churches might be possible. Of course there are congregations where the word is being taught and people are trying to live it out but over time they could become like spiritual oases in the desert.

So, why should we focus on God's word – well, the clue is in the name: it is GOD's word.

But what else

1) It CONNECTS with us!

Hebrews 4:12 *"For the Word of God is LIVING and ACTIVE ..."*

The Bible is full of DIVINE Life, Supernatural life, the very life of God Himself! Every other book is a dead book, its pages devoid of life. The Bible is always relevant, always fresh, never obsolete, never stagnant!

Pastor Vsevolod Lytkin from Siberia, has an interesting story. He described his personal journey to faith in Jesus Christ in this way:

His parents were atheistic university professors at a local university who raised their son to "think for himself". During his teen years, he struggled with many spiritual

questions. When the communists told him there was no god, he reasoned that there might be a God and so began a search for reading material where he might find the answers.

The only books of religion available at his local library were atheistic, but they often quoted verses from the Bible to mock or refute them. His greatest discovery was a set of encyclopedias on atheism about which he says, "I carefully wrote down Biblical quotations from them, I tried to get them in order so as to understand what the Bible was talking about." It was not very long before he began to pray to God and ask Him to forgive his sins.

2) It CONVICTS us!

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

The Bible never fails to cut! There is no blunt side to it! It is two-edged. It cuts both ways. It is able to tear down AND to build up. A woman went to the post office to mail a Bible to her son who was in college. "Ma'am," asked the postal clerk, "does this package contain anything breakable?" "Only the Ten Commandments," she replied.

3) It CONVERTS us!

1 Peter 1:23

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

4) It CONFORMS us!

1 Peter 2:2

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

5) It COUNSELS us!

Psalms 119:105

Your WORD is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

PSALM 119:11

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

6) It CONQUERS our enemy!

Ephesians 6:17

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the WORD of God.

Let's be sure that we do not experience a self-imposed famine of the Word by neglecting to study it and take it for granted. There is an expectation that the longer we are believers the more familiar we should be with the bible

Hebrews 5:12-14 *In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

We can avoid the devastating effects of a famine, through spending time reading the bible and with good bible-based teaching and preaching.

So, the challenge for us this morning is to

1. Make a commitment not to neglect the all-powerful word of God.
2. Read it as often as possible, preferably daily.
3. Pray that God will help us to understand it, and put it into practice.