



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

Go, prophesy to my people

Readings: Amos 7:12-15, Ps 84, Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6: 7-13

‘No more prophesying in Bethel. This is the royal sanctuary, the national shrine’.

I sometimes wonder what the lectionary setters were thinking when they threw in puzzling little gobbets of Old Testament story as an *hors d'oeuvre* to the Gospel main course. Was there an expectation, for example that the average Mass goer would do their homework and arrive fully briefed? Or is there an expectation that the preacher is going to be able, in the astonishingly brief attention span attributed to Catholic homily consumers, to elaborate a backdrop in which the ministry of Jesus makes historic sense and can be seen to fulfil the eternal purposes of God.

Here goes.

Amos is the first writing prophet that we know. His work is done in the mid 8th century B.C. He is not a professional, he does not belong to a guild of prophets or earn his living in religious service. He claims to be a fig farmer.

He lives in the southern kingdom of Judah, the little remnant of two tribes, based in Jerusalem, after the ten northern tribes broke away from the insufferable rule of Solomon's spoilt brat son, Rehoboam, to form the northern kingdom of Israel.

The northern kingdom, not having Jerusalem, developed its own cult, often pagan, and was generally much more successful, both economically and militarily, than little Judah. Their excesses and drift from the true faith dates back to the previous century and the prophecies of Elijah and Elisha. By the time of Amos there was full blown paganism and a disgusting opulence and economic injustice. The prophet inveighs against the fat cows who lie on ivory beds, boozing and building second homes while diddling the poor out of their wages and indulging in every kind of economic legerdemain.

The root of all this is the desertion of the Faith. They do not take God's law seriously. But that is not to say they do not turn up for national worship. They do. But it is meaningless.

So Amos turns up at Bethel to preach repentance. This is the equivalent of a Bodmin beet farmer turning up at Westminster Abbey on Remembrance Sunday and pointing out that there was some major disjunction between the key players, the state of the nation and the Christian Faith.

'Unwelcome' would be an understatement.

Amaziah, the Bethel equivalent of the Archbishop of Canterbury, tells him to sling his hook which Amos does – but not before accurately predicting the terrible destruction of the kingdom by the vicious Assyrians (the brutal

occupants of northern Iraq, Syria and southern Turkey) and the final and irreparable loss of the ten tribes.

The judgement is all the more terrible because these people have been chosen by God, blessed by Him and yet rejected Him in favour of idolatry and materialism. The instrument of God's judgement on His unfaithful people is an empire of astonishing brutality and regional terrorism. Amos articulates the ancient but ever new call to repentance.

We choose between God's judgement and God's mercy. It is essentially the same call that opens the Gospel challenge, both in the mouth of John the Baptist and in the ministry of Jesus. 'Turn back to God.....or prepare for the fall of the state.'

It is the call that closes the Gospel, the call for baptising the nations and the call to obedience to the Word of God.

It is the unavoidable call of the Gospel to our hearts and the hearts of all our people. We, as Christians in a post-Christian nation must be peculiarly aware of this call and the peril of a failure to respond both personally and nationally.

In my lifetime the Church, and all the ecclesial denominations that emerged from the Reformation schism, has tried to reach out to the secularising communities in which it ministers with a gospel that is too often shorn of the one word that is the prerequisite of salvation.

'Repentance' is the one path that can lead to reconciliation with God and true liberation. Thus it contrasts starkly with the glittering misery and

ultimate dissatisfaction of materialistic idolatry because it is the road to becoming the true person and people that God intended. It is the road to joy and we need to preach and teach it as such.

If we truly wish to preach the love and joy and peace of the Gospel we need to regularly enter by the gate of humility and introduce others to the doorway of the Gospel.

In our national life it is also vital to challenge the rampant materialistic paganism that sees wealth and might, economic imperialism and power blocs, as bastions against the judgement of God. The symptoms are not new and the Assyrians are never far from the borders of the state that has abandoned God.

If the High Priest of Bethel is not prepared to speak God's Word to the king then the beet farmers of Bodmin and the labourers of Looe should not be deterred from issuing the needful warning of impending judgement and the warm invitation to return to the Faith.

Jesus Christ came to save us – but if people do not know from what, they are unlikely to respond. Jesus Christ came to reconcile us – but if people do not know to whom, how can they turn back to the mercy of God and His blessings. Only a penitent Church that knows these joys can preach repentance. So... Keep it simple. Keep it humble. Keep it welcoming but Keep it coming.