

Amos 8:1 - 12
Psalm 52
Colossians 1:15 - 28
Luke 10:38 - 42

A famine of the Word of God

As the saga of Australia's treatment of Mohamed Haneef continues to unfold the question of what values are enshrined in our liberal democracy and how they compare with what we are actually doing is brought into view. While the Indian Government calls for an explanation, the Immigration Minister stolidly maintains his position and everyone is ducking for cover. Offers to defend Haneef's case flood in from Lawyers all over the country, as people of good conscience are increasingly disturbed about the apparent disconnection between our laws and traditions, and the level of justice being offered to some in our society.

Amos the prophet was called from tending his flocks and sycamore trees to speak truth to power on behalf of the Living God. His message revealed a passionate concern for true worship and for social justice. God called the people to live in righteousness, which in turn was meant to lead to right social relations. But in the 8th century BC this was far from the case. Religious observance had become cut off from the sort of right living that issued in fair dealing in business and respectful relationships in the community.

The guiding image given in Amos' vision was a basket of summer fruit, a symbol of the end of the harvest, which symbolizes a much bigger ending. Lord says: "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by." The basket of fruit signified that the summer of God's protection was over and the "I will never again pass them by" alludes to the night in Egypt when the angel of death stalked the land, but passed over the people of Israel. God's protection has been withdrawn and ruin would strike the land. The consequence is terrifying to contemplate. The whole of life will be turned upside down. Dead bodies will be everywhere and the people will suffer the deepest grief. Psalms of praise in the Temple will turn to bitter cries of lament over the sins of the people; the distress and the losses suffered. Even the natural order will be disturbed by what seems to be an eclipse, and a change in the pattern of the Nile is invoked, another reminder of the freedom that once came to them by the hand of God in Egypt.

Amos' dire words of warning are directed to a people whose self concern had emptied worship of its meaning and led them trample on the needy and bring about the ruin of the poor. The people had become distracted in their worship. They longed for the Sabbath and the festivals to end so they could to resume trading, which involved shortchanging customers, cutting corners on deals, and treating people as commodities to be exploited. None of this will God forgive, or forget.

But the worst is that there will be a famine, not of food, but of hearing the word of the

Lord. God's presence will be withdrawn. Up to now the people have had the Word amongst them in written form. They have worshipped in the Temple, heard the words of the Torah, and occasionally a prophet delivered a living word to prick their conscience. But God has had enough of meaningless praise and will no longer endure a people who have cast off the memory that they once were slaves, and now treat the poor with contempt. The time is coming when they shall seek and not find. They shall wander to and fro and not be able to hear the words of mercy and redemption in which they once lived and rejoiced. The words, which were the key to their thankful, faithful worship, and which set the context for right relationships with one another, will no longer be accessible. And all because they were no longer listening to what they had received, they were no longer offering the worship of their hearts, and they were no longer allowing the justice and mercy of God towards them to shape their actions in community.

We cannot be sure whether Amos believed an impending invasion or similar disaster was coming as a judgement of God against the people. And we would not translate his warnings directly to our own time. But the pattern is clear. God looks for sincere worship, which translates itself into social relationships that are just and fair. The two things, which go hand in hand, are life giving and take their inspiration from the Word. That is why a famine of the Word is the direst prediction of all. There can be no worse fate than to seek the merciful love of God, and not to be able to find it.

There is a link between the prophecy of Amos and the story of Mary and Martha. Not at the level of dire predictions, but at the level of what is meant to come first in the life of the community of faith. Jesus is a prophet who brought a word from the Lord, both in what he said, and in the justice and mercy that he embodied amongst the people. In chapter 8 it was noted that women supported Jesus and went about with him. It is a vision of the Kingdom community in formation, in which traditional patriarchal and hierarchical boundaries are changed. Earlier in chapter 10 Jesus sent his disciples out to enact the Kingdom, and gave them a code of conduct to follow in connection with hospitality. They are to enter a house, and if the people are receptive, they are to stay there. If not they are to move on. On this occasion Jesus has found a hospitable feminine household, but Mary and Martha clash over how to receive him. What is at stake is the different perceptions they have of him. Mary recognized him as a prophet – a person who came to them as a messenger of grace. The one thing necessary is to be ready to be called out of herself to receive the gift he brought. Mary chose to attend to blessing of this encounter. This was far more important than being enslaved to domestic performance. For Mary there would be no famine of the Word. But Martha's distraction and concern kept her from the gift of grace that had entered her house. Jesus' words of challenge to her are also a word of grace in which he tried to call her out of her obsessions, back to the way of attentiveness and listening.

Our activist sensibilities may be offended here, but Martha's response equates with the people in Amos who did not really attend to the praise of God in worship, but instead worried about the next deal they were going to do.

The warning of Amos came about because the people had dethroned the one thing needful: they had stopped listening wholeheartedly to the word of God. In doing so they cut themselves off from the source of authentic worship, and they removed

themselves from the source of inspiration that kept their society just and fair.

The first priority of people of faith is to be ready to listen with attentive hearts to the word of God, written, preached and embodied. It comes through the Scriptures, the Preaching, the Music and the Liturgy. Even the building may speak to us. In this we will find the challenge and inspiration that shapes us as people of faith. And it forms the basis for all else that we may seek to do. Over the years various people have said social justice is not part of the Christian message. The truth is, social justice cut off from listening hearts is not part of what we are about. Hearts that truly listen to the word and walk humbly with their God cannot help but seek to live justly and to love rightly. People with such hearts will be concerned not only about how the life of the church is ordered, but about it goes with our community life too. And people of faith may feel constrained to speak to power about whether or not its actions towards the poor and the exploited are consistent, not just with our beliefs, but with the values, the laws and the traditions enshrined and proclaimed by this society itself.