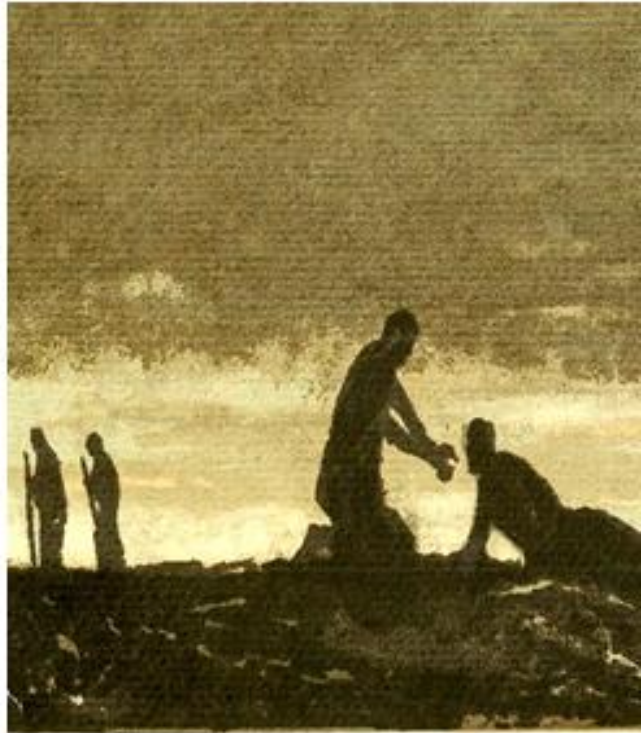


And who is my neighbour?

Sunday 10th July 2016

Amos 7:7-9

Luke 10:25-37



“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” These poignant, quite memorable words were spoken by an officer of the palace guard, Marcellus, as the troubled, unsettled ghost of a murdered king appeared in the gloom of the encroaching night. It’s a famous line and it’s penned by the world’s greatest play write, William Shakespeare. Indeed, the quote refers to the endemic rottenness of a regime that extends to the misdemeanours of those at the very top.

Coming from Act One of the famous tragedy, Hamlet, this statement speaks of deception, fraud, treachery and betrayal. The words lead to a comment from Hamlet himself as the prince observes the kingdom around him is *“an unweeded garden”* of *“things rank and gross in nature”*.

Now, the idea that a regime’s state of being, that a nation’s character and reputation is grounded in the disposition of its leaders is a common one in the ancient world. And Israel was no exception. The pro’s and con’s of kingship is debated in the Old Testament and it was believed that a rotten monarch or a bad king left the nation morally bankrupt. Here the nation was said to be, as a consequence, vulnerable and exposed to the conniving exploits of others.

King Jeroboam was no exception. As king of Israel some 750 years before the birth of Christ, the nation was actually experiencing a period of extraordinary wealth. Israel was a prosperous place and the king together with his cohorts and supporters were reveling in the prestige and the success of it all.

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But all this comes at a price. The prophet Amos tells us Israel's prosperity exists on the back of many who are exploited. The kingdom's wealth is rooted in the enslavement of an underclass who are cheated by those in power. The land's affluence is built upon the dishonoring of those who are poor and vulnerable - and this done by the privileged people of the day who rule the roost.

In other words, while the nation is experiencing good times, it all comes at a very high cost – and the national leaders of the day are directly implicated in this somewhat rotten affair!

Indeed, those who ruled Israel and benefited from Israel's abundance come in for a real blast. Listen to Amos' condemnation in chapter 6 where he says:

“Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.”

Eugene Peterson, in his contemporary rendering of the Bible, says it this way:

“Woe to those who live in luxury and expect everyone else to serve them! Woe to those who live only for today, indifferent to the fate of others! Woe to the playboys, the playgirls, who think life is a party held just for them! Woe to those addicted to feeling good - life without pain! Those obsessed with looking good - life without wrinkles! They could not care less about their country going to ruin. But here's what's really coming: a forced march into exile. They'll leave the country whining, a rag-tag bunch of good-for-nothings.”

When I read these words I actually become a little nervous. I do so because this scenario is not unlike the situation we encounter today. For, we live in a land of plenty. We enjoy good education, excellent health facilities and sufficient income to meet basic needs. Very few of us go to bed hungry of a night.

Indeed, our affluence is something we value and prize especially as the subject of the economy and the prospect of economic growth continues to dominate the national narrative.

But as I read Amos it occurs to me that abundance, security and good fortune is often built on the backs of others who simply miss out. For what Amos constantly hammers is that a truly successful society must be grounded, not just in the pursuit of prosperity, but in a pledge to good ethical practice.

Here Amos reiterates that an authentically prosperous nation must be built, not just on security and abundance, but on a sincere commitment to justice. Indeed, a community who honours God must be a community who honours others. A people who are recipients of God's goodness and bounty must be a community who reaches out to, and cares for, the most vulnerable.

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With this in mind Amos introduces the idea of the “plumb line”. Now a plumb line is a tool consisting of a small, heavy object attached to a string or rope. It is used to see if something such as a wall is perfectly vertical. In other words, a plumb line measures if something is true or not.

In Amos’ case, the plumb line is a measure of God’s people to see if they line up with God’s standards of justice. The plumb line is a measure to identify if God’s community is truly faithful and consistent regarding all that God requires them to be.

And in ancient Israel’s case, the nation is found to be like a wall that is so askew it will have to be laid waste. The nation is so lop-sided it has to be reconfigured. The massive renovation of a very flawed structure is clearly required.

Now, this raises real questions concerning how we, as God’s people live. And with Amos’ plumb line in mind I am drawn to a number of realities that exist in Australia today.

Jessica Irvine, in a Sydney Morning Herald article last year, points out that the home of Australia’s highest incomes is postcode 2027 while the home of Australia’s lowest incomes is postcode 2403. These postcodes are both in the state of NSW. One is a harbour-side suburb in the city and other is a remote location in the country. The difference between the two post codes in average income is eight times. Moreover, the state of NSW is actually home to the top six richest postcodes in Australia while it’s also home to the top seven poorest postcodes.

Meanwhile, in the wake of NAIDOC week it’s troubling to see Aboriginal life expectancy in this country is ten and half years lower than the rest of the population. This means an Aboriginal person in Australia will, on average, die between ten and eleven years before any of the rest of us!

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And if you look at the incarceration rate in Australian prisons you will find that, while Aboriginal people form 3% of the population, they consist 28% of the Australian prison population. Moreover, 48% of all juveniles in custody are Aboriginal.

And the concerns do not simply rest here. Violence against women across Australia is a massive issue. Here one in five women have reportedly experienced sexual violence while one in three women have experienced physical violence.

Moreover, in the area of mental health some 14% of Australian children and adolescents have issues while as few as one in four actually receive professional health care.

On the world stage we face massive issues. Here I refer to a terrible crisis as millions of people are displaced due to violence, war and persecution. Today 63.3 million people (that's approximately three times the population of Australia) have no place to call home. That's one person for every 113 persons in the world. For those of you who are into statistics, this means some 24 people are forced to flee their homes every minute. During our time of worship in this church today some 1,440 people will have had to flee their homes somewhere across the world because others are threatening them.

Friends, with these things in mind I wonder how we stand up alongside Amos' plumbline? With such inconsistencies, with such gaps, with such contrasts between rich and poor, indeed, with the continued curse of gender based violence and such differences between those who are safe and those who are constantly falling prey to the exploits, ravages and abuse of others - how does our ethical practice, our moral responsibility and our commitment to justice actually measure up? Is there something inherently bad, perhaps even "rotten", about all of this?

Today, Luke writes about an earnest, sincere lawyer who approaches Jesus because he wants to get his life into order and ensure his faith is on the right path. In response to the lawyer's questioning Jesus implores this person to *"love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind...."*

In other words, Jesus tells this lawyer he is to put everything he has got, the lawyer is to throw everything he can muster into the priority of being faithful to God.

But Jesus adds something extra. Jesus instructs the lawyer to *"love your neighbour as yourself."* *"Do this"* Jesus says, *"and you will live."*

Friends, I can't identify a more straight forward command anywhere in the world. *"Love your neighbour as yourself."* But the lawyer still doesn't quite get it - as he asks: *"And who is my neighbour?"*

This is an important question. It's a really important question because in Jesus' time the whole "plumb line bit", the call to ethical practical, the challenge for moral responsibility and a commitment to justice was always framed within the context of the "in" group.

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In other words, Amos' call to justice was interpreted to take effect within the confines of the family or the local group. Justice was to be for "insiders" only.

So in this sense what happens to people in another post code, what happens to people of a different ethnic or cultural background, what happens to people whose lives get consumed in bad relationships or become sick with a form of mental illness - is of no account. Indeed what happens to people in Iraq, Syria, Iran or Somalia - is of no consequence. This is because they are "outsiders. They exist beyond our personal orbit. They are "out there". They are "over there". Hence, they don't matter!

But that's not how it works. Jesus, in what is the most well-known story of all, speaks about a Samaritan who does what no-one else will do. He risks everything by stopping on a dangerous roadside to care for a person he does not know. For, you see, Jesus leaves us guessing about the wounded person's identity. Indeed, this person could have been anyone from a pious priest, an itinerant worker to a violent terrorist!

The Samaritan attends to the wounded person's needs and Jesus makes things clear. When it comes to the plumb line, when it comes to standards of ethical practice, when it comes to requirements of moral responsibility and a commitment to justice - everything is on the table.

Every person comes into contention - even the person struggling to live on social security, even the indigenous youth incarcerated in our prisons, even those women who are queuing up for places in our overcrowded refuges, even those many young Australians with mental health issues and, indeed, even those millions of displaced people who are fleeing violence and persecution from many parts of the world through no fault of their own.

The image below struck me last week as I was reading a report in The Guardian. It's a makeshift church erected by Ethiopian Christians who are on the run because of persecution in their home country. Some of these people were detained recently in Libya by ISIS militants and were brutally beheaded. Now they are hoping to settle in the United Kingdom. Currently these Ethiopians are camped in Calais, France.



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This “tent” church is the focus of Ethiopian Christian life and it reminds me of another people who fled persecution in the north of Africa and wandered for many years through the countryside. Every night these people erected a makeshift “tent” or tabernacle to honour their God.



The people in question were, of course, the ancient Israelites. And we read their incredible story in the book of Exodus as they fled persecution under the Pharaohs. Here God guided these vulnerable, oppressed Israelites through the traumatic experience of fleeing oppression to seek refuge in the “promised land”.

So, you see, the spectre of people fleeing persecution from the north of Africa is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it’s happening today!

For you see, Christianity has existed in the Horn of Africa since the first century and its Jewish roots go back much longer. You may remember the story in Acts concerning the Ethiopian court official who was baptised on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza by Philip. With this event in mind, it’s important to note the Christian Church in Ethiopia goes right back to apostolic times. And today, these Christian brothers and sisters are under great stress.

Here we are challenged. We are challenged as followers of Jesus to respond to that question *“And who is my neighbour?”*

Marcellus, the palace guard, exclaimed *“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”*. By that he meant the plumb line was askew. The definition of neighbour was either absent or corrupted. A great injustice was being done.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, is there *“something rotten in the state of Denmark”* today? Is the plumb line askew?

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For, you see, the plumb line is our measure. Jesus' definition of "neighbour" is our challenge. How are we, then, to respond?

Look at the picture for a moment and think about it.

What will you do? How will you respond to Jesus?



Jesus asked: *"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man,"*

"The one who showed mercy" the lawyer answered.

Jesus replied *"Go and do likewise"*.

Amen.

John Barr

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- Amos offers a harsh critique of the nation. Do you think Amos is too hard on the king and the people - or is he being consistent with your understanding of the Gospel? Do you think Amos' critique is relevant today?
 - We are not told the identity of the person who is attacked, beaten and left for dead on the roadside (parable of the Good Samaritan). Is this an oversight on Jesus' part – or do you think this omission is significant? Why?
 - Who is your neighbour?
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