

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 12th November 2017
Remembrance Sunday

Lest we forget.

(Amos 5.18-24 & Matthew 25.1-13)

Amos is perhaps one of the oldest of our prophetic writings. He is certainly referred to as 'the earliest writing' prophet. He wrote in the mid-8th Century BC when Israel was facing the possibility of annihilation by the mighty Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, not long after Amos wrote Jerusalem fell and the nation was taken into exile for the next two centuries.

The prophet is understood as uttering the very words of God, commenting on or critiquing the relationship between God and God's people. When the nation is celebrating good times it is understood, through the interpretations of the prophets, to be a time of good relations with God. When the nation is experiencing bad times then it is because of broken relationship with God. At the time of Amos the social political picture is dire; and so is the relationship between God and his people.

Amos interprets this almost complete breakdown in relationship between God and Israel as a kind of national forgetfulness, almost amnesia. Israel is about to or is celebrating a feast known as the Day of the Lord. Amos accuses the people of having forgotten why the day is a great day and why it is kept and so he asks, 'why do you want the day of the Lord?'. In its remembering the people have become contrary to the word of God and his commands. So rather than being a day of light it becomes a day of darkness, of contrariness as the people celebrate but don't know why.

The words of Amos then make God sound like a petulant child – 'I hate, I despise your festivals!' It's almost as though God is cutting off his nose to spite his face. 'If you won't celebrate this day properly and in the right spirit of the law then I don't want any of your celebrations or festivals in my name.' But then, towards the end of this passage, we see his reaction is not one of petulance; it is because of what the people have forgotten. Through the law and the teaching of the prophets the people are called to care for the poor, the widow and the orphan. To care for those who are in need, those whose lives have been broken. The people of Israel have forgotten the core of the law which is being of service to one's neighbour, not to oneself. In forgetting the teachings of God they have forgotten their vocation of faith. Instead they have kept festival for their own pleasure, in the words of Dr Paul Joyce, Professor of Old Testament at Kings College, London, "Israel expresses the worst of all, self-centred and self-satisfied worship going hand in hand with neglect and oppression of one's neighbours". They have forgotten the way of the Lord; now the Babylonians are knocking on the gates of Jerusalem.

In the news recently a survey was reported. It suggested two thirds of under 30s would not wear a poppy. When asked why, the response was that wearing poppies glorified war. This is not a new argument. When I was an undergraduate over thirty years ago you would hear the same argument being made. Then, over time, we realised the danger of forgetting; of forgetting why the poppy was worn and why The Armistice is remembered. As this truth dawns we understood who was being remembered and why; realised that forgetting was not an option.

Amos is warning the people of the danger of forgetting. In this case, the place of the law in the lives of the people and their duty to their neighbours. A duty that puts God back at the centre of their lives and their community. In today's Gospel some of the bridesmaids forgot their oil. They effectively forgot their duty as bridesmaids to the bridegroom. When the time came their forgetfulness meant they were excluded from the party. The gospel writer describes their forgetfulness as foolish.

If then we forget why we keep Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, if we mistake the purpose of these days for something they are not then we devalue what has been given us; freedom, liberty and justice; we are foolish. If we fail to remember, if we forget, we are in danger of losing that which has been won for us all at great price. We will allow justice, liberty and freedom to be undermined and eroded, we will make the loss of so many lives worthless and we will have reneged on our responsibilities to both our past and our future. We will be doing exactly that which the people of Israel did all those centuries ago. We will cease to stand for the poor, the widow and the orphan and we will have broken our baptismal promise to follow Christ and proclaim his word.

Later in the act of worship we will gather around the altar of God to receive the Grace of God in bread and wine. In so doing we will proclaim our desire to follow Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. We will take for ourselves all that that means; to care for the poor and those in need, to proclaim the love of God in our daily lives, to work for peace, justice and freedom wherever we can.

Afterwards we will hold two minutes silence. Not for glorification, but for remembrance, our remembrance of our duty as inheritors of that which was bought through blood and mud, through self-sacrifice and service to neighbour, that which is ultimately about love of people and care for the poor, the widow and the orphan. We must not be like Amos' Israelites, forgetting our command from God through baptism and the Eucharist, to love God, love neighbour and to serve each other in peace and truth. Else we too will find our Babylon knocking at our gates and we will be lost, forever.