

July 11th: The Plumb Line Amos 7:7-16 Colossians 1:1-14

Amos and Paul are two major players in our Christian Scriptures; - of course, from different times and scenarios. Yet, each had similar concerns for their people. What do they have to say to us today - at another different time and scenario - Amos with his plumb line and Paul with his letter.

In our reading from Amos, once again the people of Israel are 'out of step' in their relationship with God.

Who is Amos? Further on in this chapter we read: "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' "

Amos was born in the Judean town of Tekoa, near modern Bethlehem. His activities probably took place during the reign of Uzziah, King of Judah (783-742 B.C.), and Jeroboam II, King of Israel (786-745). Under Jeroboam II the Northern Kingdom of Israel enjoyed one of its most happy and prosperous periods; although its relationship with the twin kingdom, the southern Kingdom of Judah, was strained at times.

For Israel, with this good political situation came economic prosperity and of course, the more wealthy the people became, and the more luxurious the lifestyle, the more there was a downward spiral in moral standards. The people started to ignore the great ideals and commandments inherent in their relationship with God: they drifted from their covenant with God. No longer did they seek to help the poor, to practice justice and loving kindness. Quiet the reverse, the rich oppressed the poor; might was right. It was an age of corruption.

And with this moral downslide went their spirituality, their worship of God and God alone. People built many altars on mountains to serve the Canaanite gods, Baal and Ashtarte. Golden Calves, were worshipped more than before and the teachings of the Torah and the holy commandments were viewed with contempt.

God sent messengers to admonish the people and to warn them that unless they mended their ways, they and the land would be doomed. This particular period of warning of coming judgement was the time of the prophets Hosea and Amos. Amos was a prophet for only a short time. He did not write down his prophetic messages and utterances. At that time, such oracles, prophecies of judgement, were preserved in an oral tradition and were transmitted by spoken word among Temple circles at Jerusalem. Amos's prophecies were probably written down before the Assyrians conquered the kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C.

His fearless and outspoken words came thundering down stirring up the people. He warned the rich who had amassed their fortunes by cheating and robbery, they would not enjoy their riches, but would lose everything. Amos was not afraid to appear in the centre of the crowds as they gathered to worship the Golden Calf. We realised how far they had wandered from their covenant with God when we see them before a Golden calf. Remember, the 10 commandments: the covenant at Sinai - there they had turned to golden calf worship whilst Moses was on Sinai "And God spoke all these words, saying: 'I am the LORD your God... ONE: 'You shall have no other gods before Me.' TWO: 'You shall not make for yourself a carved image--any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.'

In spite of the anger thrown at him, the prophet continued to remind them of the many kindnesses which God had shown since the beginning of their history as a people; and despite his severe admonitions, he finishes his prophecies on a happy note: he tells of the wonderful things that will happen in a future time. Doom, gloom, hope: I have mentioned these before as a major recurring theme within the history of the people of God at this time. They lived out a very uneven relationship with God. They turned repeatedly from this compassionate relationship to seek their own way; yet, whilst admonishing them through the prophets for their breaking of the covenant, God remained faithful.

But what about this plumb line - the focus of our reading from Amos. What is a plumb line?

A plumb-bob or a plummet is a weight, usually with a pointed tip on the bottom suspended from a string and used as a vertical reference line, or plumb-line. The instrument has been used since at least ancient Egypt to ensure that constructions are "plumb". It is dropped over and down to see if the wall is straight or tipping like the Leaning tower of Pisa. Today we use a "level" for the same job.

Amos writes that God uses such a thing for a divine test of the people: 'I saw God standing beside a wall that had been built with the use of a plumb line and there was a plumb line in his hand. God was using it to show that the people are like a wall that is out of line.' They failed the test miserably.

Let's pause and ponder how would we rate in a plumb test regarding our relationship with God. Straight and level or leaning like the tower of Pisa.

There are similarities between what Amos is on about with the Jewish people of his time and with what Paul is concerned about with the young church in Colosse, the gentiles who comprised the congregation. Colosse was about one hundred miles from Ephesus and very near to Laodicea. We remember Laodicea as one of the churches from the seven letters in Revelation. It was a very rich area and Colosse was famous for its dye used in dyeing cloth. Once it had been a very prosperous city but by the time of Paul it had become the most unimportant city Paul had ever written to.

Paul had never been in Colosse but Paul had their care, their maturity in Christ, in his heart. He is in prison in Rome when he hears something was going wrong in Colosse and so he writes to drop the plumb line of divine testing to let them see whether they were straight or leaning in their God relationship!

It is most probable that the church here was founded during the three years Paul spent in Ephesus - 52 -55AD. This period had been a time of expansion for the Christian faith and it may well be that it was Epaphras - mentioned in our reading - who was responsible for forming the church in Colosse and who remained strongly involved in the life of this congregation. It was certainly

Epaphras who tells Paul - probably in a visit to the jail, that while much good is happening, something was going wrong. Paul writes to stifle the trouble - the downward slide - before it takes hold and spreads.

What had gone wrong? In this town of Colosse had arisen a heresy, which, if it had remained unchecked, might well have seen the ruination of the Christian faith ... according to William Barclay.

The details of the heresy are not known by scholars however there are hints given in the letter of Paul. The heresy very much attacked the supremacy of Christ, the uniqueness. Paul addresses the false teaching by declaring Christ is the image of the invisible God - in him all fullness dwells; in him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge. In him all things were created and in him all things have their proper place. Through the writing of this letter as Paul confronts the challenge of this heresy, one can discern the development of Paul's thinking as he prayerfully ponders Jesus of Nazareth and his resurrection and just what that means for Christianity. In this letter we can see the crystallizing of Christian thought within early Christian thinking - Christology specifically.

The heresy was striking at other levels as well: It seems as one goes further into the letter that an Astrological element was present in the heresy leaking into the congregation. At the same time, it would appear it made much of the powers of demonic spirits. The ancient world lived around the world of the stars and the natural forces. They lived in a demon-haunted universe and Christians were not immune to these beliefs.

From Paul's letter, it can be gathered, these false teachers were saying that really, given their worldview, they needed more than the power of the Risen Christ to overcome the powers of deceit. Chapter 2 reveals also that in the daily living the false teachers were recommending the observation of special days and rituals with festivals for the new moons; and they started to introduce rules about food and drink. We learn some were claiming to be superior because they had special visions and insisted on worshipping angels. All in all, the heresy was trying to turn Christianity into a philosophy.

Like Amos, Paul steps into the arena to argue his case. Paul does not hesitate to remind these young Christians of the great love God has for them and the reconciliation, salvation, given through the work of Jesus of Nazareth, who came teaching, preaching the reconciling word of God and who through his death and resurrection brought the gift of life to humankind. **In him alone, Paul emphasis** is found all Truth, all wisdom, all knowledge, all Love and all needed for life now and in the future.

Back to this plumb line: What is the plumb line for Paul in this letter: what is the divine test of being in relationship with God. Of living straight and level and not leaning ...

There are two tests and they are the pillars of the Christian journey according to Paul and found in Colossians 1: 4 : We have heard of your faith in Jesus Christ and of your love for all God's people.

Faith in Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Lord and love: love for all people - enemies as well as those we love and those we like: Paul's letter deals with keeping straight, keeping level in expressing these two pillars of our Christian journey inspite of what comes your way to confront, to challenge your belief.

How do we pass the divine test: prayer and trust in God through Jesus. Read through Colossians 4: 12+

You are the people of God: God loved you and chose you to be God's own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another when ever any of you has a complain against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity. The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make; for it is to this peace that God has called you together in the one body. And be thankful. Christ's message in all its richness must live in your hearts.

May God's love dwell in our hearts this day.

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I know this is getting a bit long but that last statement is just too good of a segue way to a story I heard the late Pastor David Scoates at the Crystal Cathedral tell: There was once a man walking on the beach and

he noticed that the sand was covered with starfish that had washed ashore. Down the beach a ways, he noticed someone throwing something into the water. He continued walking toward him until he got close enough to see that the man was actually throwing starfish into the surf. The first man said to the man throwing the starfish, "Man, what are you doing?" To which the other man said " Why, I'm saving starfish, can't you see?" The first man replied, "Man, are you crazy, can't you see that this beach is literally covered with starfish . . . you can't possibly make a difference!" then the other man bent over and picked up another starfish and threw it back into the ocean and replied, "Made a difference to that one!"