

4 before Lent A pm

5th February 17

Place: St Mary's Evensong Amos 2.4-end

Theme: Why come to church?

Ephesians 4.17-end

- ◆ Every so often it is worth thinking about why we come to church and what difference it makes. This evening's readings address those questions.
- ◆ Amos like many of the Old Testament Prophets warns the people of God that being religious and participating in worship is not sufficient. God wants more than that from his people. Amos structures his prophecies to lull his listeners into complacency and self-satisfaction. The book begins with prophecies of God's judgement and coming punishment to the nations surrounding Israel and Judah. This would have gone down very well with his audience, they probably lapped it up. Then he suddenly turns his attention to them and tells them that God is just as angry with their sins as he is with those of the peoples around them. God's judgement and punishment is coming to them too.
- ◆ Correct cultic practices are not going to change this, what needs to change is their behaviour. They need to have good relationships. Justice and mercy are what count with God, not how often we say our prayers. All our relationships are subject to God's judgement. Our wider social relationship, so participating in social structures that oppress and exploit the poor are just as bad

as personal wickedness. When Amos talks about father and son going into the same woman, he is probably talking about temple or some other kind of prostitution. Relationships in this society have become corrupt at both a family and national level.

- ◆ Amos warns those who are wealthy and powerful particularly against relying on their resources to save them. ‘Nor shall those who ride horses save their lives’. I think less a warning to me that riding on the common is not going to save me. I don’t think I ever thought that, but rather relying on military power and equipment will not help. Horses had a similar place on the battle field in the ancient world to tanks in modern warfare.
- ◆ So does that mean we don’t need to bother coming to church? There are certainly people who think that and they are often keen to explain to me when they meet me that they don’t need to go to church because they live good lives. The trouble is that relying on our own goodness, our own sense of right and wrong is just another way of relying on our own resources. Our judgements are not always very good. We do not always have a correct sense of right and wrong.
- ◆ Story of muggers in Hulme.
- ◆ Paul in the letter to the Ephesians is also keen to say that simply coming to church is not enough.

If we come to church but are not willing to be changed then we are wasting our time.

- ◆ We need to come to church, we need to worship together, because we can only be saved by God's grace. We cannot make ourselves good and holy, only God can do that. Paul tells the Ephesians that they must 'be renewed in the spirit of your minds'. The Christian journey is about being made new in Christ and having the image of God restored in us. We cannot do this on our own because we really can't see straight.
- ◆ One of my favourite verses in Ephesians is where Paul says 'Thieves must give up stealing'. It is easy to have an all too rosy view of the early church. I find it very comforting that Paul needed to tell thieves they had to change their ways. Even in those early days Christians were reluctant to let their faith change them, it should not surprise us that it is still hard for us today.
- ◆ Human beings are born believing that we are the centre of the universe and that life is about meeting our needs and satisfying our desires. The trouble is that we soon discover that either we are frustrated, or if we can satisfy our lusts it is often at the expense of other people. Donald Trump is a powerful demonstration of this. Ultimately this leads to death and we are enslaved to our own or other people's desires. This is the slavery of sin. This is what was happening in Amos's society. The desire for

wealth of the powerful was reducing the poor to destitution and exploitation. Their sexual desires lead to the exploitation of women and corrupted family relationships. It was deathly.

- ◆ Jesus came to show us another way and to save us from this mire of misery and self-destruction. Jesus came to show us both what God was really like, but also what God wants humans to be like. He is the only person who fully reflected God's glory in his humanity. He came to lead us in a new way, to give us grace and to help us become who God made us to be.
- ◆ We come to church because it is only with the help of God and one another that we can follow Christ and find his Kingdom. It is only through worship and prayer that we can reconnect with God and become the people God wants us to be. Set free by his service and putting God rather than our selfish lusts and desires at the centre of our lives. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in us, but it can only happen if we co-operate with it. We need to be willing to let go of our old ways and be changed. As we travel with Christ and one another as his disciples, as we allow Him to change us we will start to show the fruit of that in our lives. We will be more careful in what we say. We will be kinder to one another, tender hearted and forgiving and we will be so not because we want to be nice, but because that is just the thing that we most desire. One of the

central elements of Christian discipleship is the schooling of our desires. As we worship, as we pray, as we open ourselves to God's holy spirit we learn to love what is good. We learn to seek first God's kingdom and when we do so we also discover the deep joy of knowing and loving God and our neighbour.