

## A Reflection from Revd Ali for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

Our readings today (Amos 7: 7 – 15 and Mark 6; 14 – 29) are very different, but they share a common theme: that there is a personal cost to those who dare to speak truth to power. A very apposite lectionary theme considering everything that is going on in our country at the moment. Amos, who had been a shepherd before God called him to be a prophet, was in Israel, the northern kingdom of the people of God. God spoke to Amos and made it very clear that God has lost patience with the people of Israel. The people had turned away from God time and time again and God was going to punish the people. Amos tried to intercede with God on the people's behalf, but Amos' prayers no longer cut the mustard. It was time that the people had a wake-up call - a wake-up call that actually came in the form of exile in Assyria about 50 years later. Amos didn't know that he wouldn't live to see his prophecy fulfilled, but he knew that God has given him a message to pass on. So Amos speaks truth to power. He prophesies to the people, telling them that God plans to send them into exile and that their king will die by the sword.

Because Amos had raised his head above the parapet, because he was prepared to do what God has asked him to do, the priest Amaziah confronted Amos at the holy shrine at Bethel. As Jeroboam's (the king's) high priest, Amaziah should have been the one that came close to God, to understand God's will for the kingdom. Jeroboam listened to Amaziah and trusted his counsel. So, when Amaziah heard Amos' prophecy and realized that it would be something that Jeroboam would not want to hear, Amaziah appealed to the king to deport Amos from Israel. By accusing Amos of sedition instead of prophecy, he tried to avoid Amos speaking God's truth to power. But when Amaziah confronted Amos, Amos replied that he had no option other than to report what God has told him. Amos continued that he wasn't a learned priest like Amaziah, he was just an ex-shepherd and fig farmer. Someone who would have been quite happy to remain as such, instead of having the responsibility of prophecy thrust upon him. But Amos realized that he was God's instrument on earth. It was God's choice not his. Amos was just being faithful to God, unlike Amaziah and the people of Israel.

John the Baptist also spoke truth to power when he challenged King Herod Antipas with biblical truth. John's teaching and preaching had challenged all the people of God, to examine their lives, to repent and turn again to God. This included the king. John pointed out that Herod's relationship with his half-brother's ex-wife was incestuous. John did this so that even Herod, could repent and turn again to God. It must have taken such a great deal of courage to publicly criticize Herod, but John was also doing what God had asked him to do. To give *all* the people the chance to change their lives, to repent and to make themselves right with God. Both Herod and Herodias would have known that their relationship wasn't right, but in their position of power, they had chosen to ignore God's law. How often do we witness those in positions of power who have the attitude of 'we are powerful, therefore the rules don't apply to us'? Herodias was obviously upset by her conduct being questioned so publicly so she instigates John's murder. Herod had arrested John but was fascinated by him and knew him to be a respected holy man. Herodias however, was incensed by her public humiliation, because John had raised the theological issue of her marriage to Herod. Herodias then manipulated Herod into ordering John's murder.

Speaking truth to power cost John his life in the most gruesome of circumstances. Amos wasn't executed, but the threat of expulsion from Israel would have made life really difficult for him. Amos had already been uprooted from his home and work to be a prophet for God, and Amaziah was definitely out to make his life difficult by abusing his position and power.

So what do these two, very different, historic stories have to do with us here in Corley and Fillongley? Well, we too have a choice. We too are called to speak truth to power when we see injustice, inhumanity, cruelty and people breaking God's laws. It is up to us to speak out, to challenge and to offer the chance of repentance and forgiveness.

Fortunately, for us here in the UK, it is not too dangerous put our heads above the parapet. We can be publicly Christian without the fear of being expelled, imprisoned or murdered for our beliefs. Although, as we know, there are still some places in the world where that isn't the case. The cost of being publicly Christian can still be a very high price to bear in some countries, but faithful people still do it. So what is the cost of being publicly Christian to us?

Well, it might cost us some time. To speak out for God might mean that we miss out on things that we would prefer to do instead. Maybe it's writing letters or emails to our MP or others in positions of power - calling them out on injustice and inhumanity instead of watching the telly. It might be coming to church instead of washing the car or going shopping. Joining a protest march instead of watching Wimbledon. Spending time with people who don't know God yet, instead of doing a myriad of other things that we want to do.

Speaking out God's truth may also be inconvenient or uncomfortable to others. People may not want to be reminded of how far their lives are, from the life in all its fullness that God through Jesus Christ offers us. Sometimes being publicly Christian might cost us friends. Some are very uncomfortable being associated with someone who is publicly Christian. A little bit like the high priest trying to get rid of Amos, being publicly Christian makes you stand out. Being honest, befriending outsiders, challenging behaviour that we know isn't right, might mean that some people that you thought were friends walk away from you – and that is painful.

Being publicly Christian might cost us money. We might choose to support agencies like Christian Aid, Amnesty International or Microfinance charities such as Lend with Care. We might choose to provide financial support to organizations that are dedicated to speaking and acting out the truth of God's word in the world. Being publicly Christian might cost us status in worldly terms. Challenging unjust policies or processes in companies or organizations could lead to being passed over for promotion. Or in extreme cases could lead to a loss of employment.

All those things are costly and uncomfortable, but it is what we are all called to do. We don't all have to be great activists or well-known public names. But we are all called to witness to the truth of God's word to the powerful. We might just be one small voice crying out in the wilderness, but sometimes one small voice is all that it needs. One small voice can tip the balance from the status quo, one small voice can be joined with others to become a movement.

And that is our challenge today. Are we going to count the cost of being publicly Christian, or of speaking truth to power and find that it is too expensive? Or are we prepared to stand up, and declare God's love to a world that is in desperate need of it? Are we prepared to be the one whose head is above the parapet, not because we want to, but because it is what God asks us to do? To be God's messengers, God's hands and feet in this place at this time? To do that thing that God has put on our hearts, no matter how uncomfortable or how unpopular it might make us?

A tough challenge, but the great news is that we don't have to do it on our own. Amos knew and John knew that God *will* empower us with gift of the Holy Spirit. We just have to be willing to open our hearts and minds to God and to be prepared to act when God calls.

In Jesus' name. Amen

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For those of you who would like to listen to Archdeacon Barry preach his sermon from last Sunday, here is the link ~

<https://vimeo.com/569263033/27b961764e>