

**Sermon on Amos 1:3-2:16 Preached at St. Andrew's Church of Scotland,  
Brussels 10 May 2009 Robert Innes**

May I begin by expressing my thanks to Revd Andrew Gardner and to you for your welcome to St. Andrew's Church of Scotland today. St. Andrew's and Holy Trinity share much in common. Our buildings were both constructed in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. We are both English-speaking international churches. And as Presbyterians and Anglicans, our churches both share in different ways the insights of the European Reformation. So, as the pastor of a sister church in this city it is a delight for me to be here.

My own family name is, of course, a Scottish one. Though I'm not in touch with any Scottish roots, the Clan Innes originate from Elgin in the North East of Scotland. The Innes Clan motto is 'Be traist' which means 'be faithful', which I think is an excellent motto for any family.

It is always a risk when you invite a visiting preacher. Will you understand their accent? Will they preach the gospel? And how long will they go on for? The story is told of an elderly Anglican minister. It was his custom, whenever he invited a visiting preacher to offer to make them a cup of tea. As the sermon started he filled up an old steam kettle. He put the kettle on a gentle gas ring, and after a suitable period of time the water boiled, the kettle whistle blew and the preacher knew it was time to end his sermon. Except, the old minister said, "when the bishop comes, I generally put a bit less water in the kettle."

This morning we are invited to consider the book of Amos, chapter 1 verse 3 to chapter 2 verse 3. Last week Andrew gave you an introduction to Amos, so I won't repeat that. But one thing by way of context. Amos is very much concerned with the holiness of God. Amos looks back to the book of Exodus, where God first reveals himself to Moses in the fire of burning bush, and in the fire and tempest of Mount Sinai. And here again, in Amos preaching, God shows himself through fire: "He speaks and the top of Mount Carmel withers" (verse 2), "He sends fire on the house of Hazeel" (verse 4); he sends fire upon the house of Teman (verse 12). But the key point, for Amos, as for other prophets of his era, is that God's holiness is not simply a matter of fire and brimstone, of being 'wholly other', of being 'fascinating and tremendous'. When Isaiah sees a vision of the Lord high and lifted up in the temple, he is afraid because of the *moral purity* of the Lord. So Amos's God is supremely a God of justice and righteousness. In Amos's day, it was *not evident* that divinity, holiness and justice were all bound up together. The gods of the Canaanites, just like the later gods of the Greeks and the Romans, might be terrifying and fearful, but they weren't necessarily moral or good. Amos wishes to drive home the point that Israel's God, the true God, shows himself holy and worthy of respect precisely because of his passionate concern for justice and righteousness. And, as we consider Amos, it might be worth reflecting: is it evident to everyone in our day, that our God is distinctive and different and holy precisely because of his burning, passionate concern for righteousness and justice?

So we turn to our text and God's judgement on Israel's neighbours. Amos proceeds around Israel's borders, from Damascus in the North East, to Gaza in the West, to Tyre in the North West to Edom in the South. The oracles all take similar forms. There is an introductory formula, a rhetorical device: for three sins, even for four I will not turn back my wrath. Then there is the description of some grave moral error. And thirdly, the description of divine punishment, which is typically destruction by fire. There are six oracles of judgement, and they are highly instructive.

The first, verse 3 is for inhuman treatment of enemies; driving heavy threshing sledges over people's bodies as you would over agricultural crops. Amos has in mind here the extreme brutality of an invading Syrian army driving over others with iron spikes. Yet even in war, there are limits. So in our day we have developed conventions to safeguard the treatment of enemy combatants or prisoners of war. And our European Union rightly insists that new members of the Union should be committed to basic standards of respect for human dignity and rights. The first moral rule then: people are always to be treated as people, never as things.

Secondly, verse 6: Gaza is subject to judgement for taking captive whole communities and selling them to others. Slavery was, of course, a feature of ancient – and indeed not so ancient – societies. The criticism here seems to be of the wholesale subordination of the welfare of peoples to human profit. Yet the whole idea of 'selling people' is obnoxious. In our day we call it human trafficking. And it is still very big business. It is reckoned that 2 to 4 million people are trafficked within their own countries and across borders every year, in a trade which generates twice as much worldwide revenue as Coca Cola. Second moral rule: 'people should not be bought and sold'.

Thirdly, verse 9: Tyre is subject to judgement for selling communities of captives in specific breach of a treaty of brotherhood. Like Gaza, Tyre is indicted for human trafficking. But in this case there is an added reproach that she is acted in breach of treaty obligations. Of course sometimes treaties have to be broken. Events and circumstances change. But in general, solemn obligations to others should be honoured. We are not simply to cast aside vows and covenants we made to others just because it suits us. Third moral rule: 'keep your promises'.

Fourthly, verse 11: Edom is judged for pursuing his brother with the sword and for stifling all compassion. This is an indictment against unreasonable and uncontrolled hatred. The passage conveys a sense of bestial anger directed against people who should have been friends and allies. It has been true throughout history that people often reserve the fiercest enmity for those who are closest to them, be this in relations between nations or relations within families. If you look at certain Christian blogs and chat sites on the web you realise that even Christians often reserve their most spiteful behaviour for each other. The fourth moral rule is: "Do not nurse hatred for your brother in your heart."

Fifthly, verse 13: the sin of Ammon: "He ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead". Well this horrific behaviour needs no elaboration. In order to extend its borders Ammon was prepared to indulge in violence against even the mothers of unborn children. In the twentieth century this kind of behaviour was formally outlawed by the international community in the fourth Geneva Convention, which forbids violence against non-combatants in war. But, as we know, atrocities still occur. The fifth moral rule is: "Safeguard the vulnerable."

And sixthly, Chapter 2 verse 1: Moab is condemned for burning the bones of Edom's king as if to lime. This seems to be a gratuitous act of violence against the dead body of a defeated king. Whereas the previous atrocities concerned violence against unborn children, here we are concerned with violence at the end of life. The sixth moral rule is: "respect the dead".

Well, I wonder how you feel when you hear this list of atrocities? You might say, 'well I don't come to church to hear this sort of thing'. And I would sympathise with

you. I don't like reading it either. But you might also say, "I get enough of this sort of thing on my television screen every day."

And that would seem to me precisely the point. All these terrible things that Amos was recounting still go on in our world today. And it is extremely important to know and to believe that, if there is a god, then he is a god who is concerned about them. Although the God of Abraham is Israel's God, yet he is still concerned for the welfare of nations beyond Israel. He has put in men's minds a sense of right and wrong, a conscience, which does not depend upon any special revelation. And so Israel's God, because he is the only true God, calls all the nations to account. He did in Amos's day, and he does in our day.

But before we start to draw some conclusions and draw to a close, there are some further verses to consider. Having called the pagan nations to account, Amos now turns his attention to the home front. The remainder of chapter 2 concerns the behaviour of Judah and of Israel. Now of course the important thing to remember about Judah and Israel was that they were a bit like England and Scotland. They were united under King David with the capital down in the South in Jerusalem. But the northern tribes resented Southern domination and they wanted independence. Amos was from the north, so when his fiery judgement turned on the people of southern Judah, you can bet that his audience was delighted. Unfortunately, though most of what he has to say concerns his fellow Israelites. By far the longest section on judgement – verses 6 to 16 of chapter 2 is an oracle of judgement on his own people of Israel.

Now there's a very interesting change of emphasis when Amos addresses Judah and Israel as against the pagan nations. When he was calling the other nations to account, Amos was addressing explicitly moral errors. He was decrying people's inhumanity to their fellow man. But notice in chapter 2 the keynote of the judgement against Judah and Israel, is a religious one. Ch2 verse 3: "They have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept their his decrees *because* they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors followed." In the case of the pagan nations, there was a failure of conscience. In the case of Israel there is a problem with idolatry. Israel has run after false gods.

Notice, however, that what happens when the people depart from the true and living God, is that their moral behaviour falls into very similar errors to that of the pagans. Ch 2 verse 6: "They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed." These are Jewish people; these are religious people. But their behaviour is showing exactly the same telltale signs of corruption as their pagan neighbours. And it is for this reason that God's judgement is coming upon them, just as it is coming upon the pagans.

In parenthesis: Those of you who know your Bibles may remember a similar line of argument in St. Paul's letter to the Romans. St. Paul first decries the immoral behaviour of the pagans. Then he complains that the moral behaviour of the Jews is no better. Finally, he says, in Romans 3:23, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And that is why all must seek justification not through their own moral goodness but through the grace that comes through redemption in Jesus Christ.

Well let me try now to draw some threads together.

Firstly, because God is the only God he calls the nations to account. He is not simply a territorial God. Because he is the Creator his moral rules apply to everyone. It is not necessary to have the Old Testament law, it is not necessary to have the gospel, to know basic moral rules. All human beings are endowed with consciences as part of their created nature. And so we have a right to expect and demand that all people will treat other people with basic decency and dignity. It is not adequate to argue that ‘well I’m an Edomite’ and we Edomites do things differently. We can’t allow people to shelter behind cultural relativism when it comes to basic, decent behaviour.

Secondly, God’s holiness is shown in his justice and righteousness. In our day there is a lot of talk about spirituality. And one sometimes gets the impression that to be spiritual is to have a kind of aura of peacefulness and to go around with a benign smile on your face. But much contemporary religiosity of a New Age kind, has no moral force. In that sense it is similar to the pagan religions described in the Old Testament. Judeo-Christian monotheism, is by contrast, highly demanding. It insists on righteousness. Not just that, but it demands righteousness even for those who are not part of the tribe or part of the church.

Today God’s justice and righteousness are not, typically, revealed in thunderbolts and fire from heaven. But some of recently created human agencies, do, I believe, act as agents for his justice. A member of our own church has been working for several years as part of the International Justice Mission in Rwanda. Or, I think, for example, of the international criminal court in the Hague. In this Court, those who are accused of the worst kinds of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide can be brought to justice. And if you can click on the their web-site you can see the proceedings against, for example, those accused of using child soldiers in Northern Uganda, or those accused of Genocide in Darfur. Surely, one of the good things about the modern world is that there are now at least some structures which respond to the prophet’s cry for justice. Amos would surely have approved of these.

Thirdly, and lastly, it is the vocation of the church to have a deserved reputation for moral righteousness. If we look back on its history, the institutional church has not always been a morally good institution. It has been guilty of oppression, it has acted with violence, it has even from time to time approved the use of torture. As is often said, “the corruption of the best is the worst”. So let us, as Christian people, take the message of Amos to heart. Let’s hear the prophet’s words to us. May we work for a church which is passionate about justice, renowned for its care of the vulnerable, deeply committed to addressing the moral evils which haunt our own world as they did the world of Amos. That is surely something which both Anglicans and Presbyterians can truly affirm, share and sign up to.