

## **Amos 7,vs 7-15**

<sup>7</sup> *This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand.*

<sup>8</sup> *And the Lord asked me, "What do you see, Amos?"*

*"A plumb line," I replied.*

*Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.*

<sup>9</sup> *"The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam."*

<sup>10</sup> *Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words.*

<sup>11</sup> *For this is what Amos is saying: "Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land."*

<sup>12</sup> *Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.*

<sup>13</sup> *Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom."*

<sup>14</sup> *Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees.*

<sup>15</sup> *But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'*

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There was a house painter called Jack, who was always interested in economising where he could. So, he often would thin down his paint to make it go a wee bit further. As it happened, he got away with this for some time.

Now, the local Church decided to do a big restoration job and Jack put in a painting bid and because his price was so competitive, he got the job. And so he set to, with a right good will, erecting the trestles and putting up the planks, and buying the paint and...yes, I am sorry to say, thinning it down with the turpentine.

Well, Jack was up on the scaffolding, painting away, the job nearly done, when suddenly there was a horrendous clap of thunder. The sky opened and the rain poured down, washing the thin paint from all over the church and knocking Jack fair off the scaffold to land on the ground amongst the tombstones.

Now, Jack was no fool. He knew this was a judgement from the Almighty, so he fell on his knees and cried, 'Oh, God! Forgive me! What should I do?' And from the thunder, a mighty Voice spoke, 'Repaint you thinner, And go and thin no more!'

So the reading from the Old Testament for today – Amos 7 7-15, complements what we heard in the Gospel reading from Mark chap 6. Both passages concern prophetic figures — Amos and John the Baptist — who are confronted because of their condemning, prophetic message. Amos is asked to leave the land of Israel; John is beheaded.

Today's passage from Amos actually begins in the middle of the story. Verses 7-9 present the third of three visions of judgment against Israel. At the start of the chapter, Amos sees locusts eating away the spring growth (7:1-3). Next, Amos sees a shower of fire consuming the land (7:4-6). Finally, in our passage Amos sees a wall built with a plumb line. This vision is more elaborate than the other two in that God asks Amos: "What do you see?" Amos responds with the item right in front of him — the plumb line. But God has a different sort of plumb line in mind.

The plumb line, a weight on the end of a string, is what builders use to make certain that their walls stand vertically straight during construction. A wall may look right, but if it doesn't match the plumb

line then it is out of kilter. It judges how the wall is measuring up. It helps maintain the integrity of the building by providing a vertical reference point.

God, however, has a different use for the plumb line. God is setting a religious and ethical plumb line for the kingdom of Israel to see how they stand – to judge whether the people of Israel are straight by his standards - and the people fail to measure up.

They are not upright. The plumb line demonstrates their tottering and wavering and God's judgement is that God will no longer spare them and despite acknowledging them as his people, God will pass them by, no longer acting as a deliverer and provider.

Now Amos was a farmer, a shepherd from Judah, who also looked after sycamore-fig trees, and he speaks bluntly to the authorities in Israel. He wasn't what might be described as a professional prophet. God called him to leave his job and carry a message to the people of Israel. God said go and Amos obeyed. He is considered to have been one of the twelve minor prophets, an older contemporary of Hosea and Isaiah. When we hear the word "prophet", we often think of someone whose primary job is to tell the future. But prophets had a much more important job: they were called to bring the hard truth to God's people, so that they would realize their need for reconciliation with God.

Amos brought unexpected bad news to the people and the authorities of Israel – that God had judged them and wanted justice - their homes and their sacred high places would be destroyed. The wealthy Israelites had been getting their luxuries at the expense of the poor and had changed their relationship with God to conveniently fit in with their lives. God however has a different perspective.

Amos key teachings to the people of Israel found throughout his book are that:

- Prayers and sacrifices do not make up for bad deeds
- Behaving justly is much more important than ritual

- Economic justice was necessary to preserve the nation
- The relationship between the people (of Israel) and God is a moral contract
- Dependence on God is a requisite towards fulfilment

Clearly these resonate with Christians today.

The message, however, was not welcome and Amos was denounced by the Head Priest of Bethel and strongly advised to leave the kingdom. But the denial of Amos's voice does not alter the truth. The judgment that Amos delivers against Israel cannot be separated from the injustices he names. He stood firm and obeyed God's command to prophesy.

So what can we learn from today's readings . . . apart from the risk of losing our heads like John?

One is that whilst our own identities are often wrapped up in the jobs we hold, it is the gifts that we are given by God that enable us to make a difference. Amos as he states, did not come from a line of prophets and preachers, he was a shepherd until he heard God's call. For ourselves, there is always something we can do to advance the gospel, and even though different people have different gifts, we are all called by God to use them to bring people to Him, to respond to the great commission and spread the Good News. For us, our identities aren't wrapped up in our jobs or in titles, or even in achievements and education; instead our identity is found solely in Christ and our response to the call isn't judged by worldly plumb lines of success, but by our faithfulness to the mission God has given us.

*[Roger Hull]*