



Amos 7:7-17, Ephesian 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29

The very solidity of our institutions, the beauty of our buildings, the historic richness of our liturgy and music all conspire together to say to us that we have achieved much, and the future is in our hands: when we then look at the context in which we live, the changes in our society, the contradictions and struggles within our own beliefs and understandings of the call and purpose of God, to have all in our own hands often feels insecure and leads us to fear.

When we fear, we retreat into ourselves and become yet more fearful and insecure, as we find within ourselves the darkness and tendency to sin which leads us to doubt our own capacity to overcome the threats that loom like dark shadows in a child's room at night, promising far more danger than they are capable of delivering.

And so, like children in the night, we wake crying, reaching for any perceived safety, whether in change or in opposing all change. As a very small child I remember waking in my father's flat to find a lion in the bedroom. It sat there watching me, merely a dark shape and shadow four or five feet away.

For hours I lay petrified (it was probably nearer 30 seconds, but I must have been about three) and then with great courage moved my hand millimetre by millimetre, or as we said then inch by inch, until I found the cord of the light and turned it on. My chair, with my clothes piled untidily upon it, bared its teeth at me in an unfriendly way.

In the darkness of fear, every threat is magnified out of all reality, and it is only resolved with light.

Amos had much reason to fear. From Tekoa, a wilderness area in the south, in the country of Judah, where he looked after a rare sort of sheep that could exist in those conditions, and tended to the unusual sycamore that grew in that area, he was two or three days walk at most from the northern Kingdom of Israel, and its capital and its shrine at Bethel.

He must have been before but here he goes and speaks clearly, telling them that a plumb line is set among them. In the Old Testament that is one of the symbols of a building or place destined to destruction. They had been measured and found wanting. What fear he must have felt in the middle of the festival crowd, there for a good time, with the force of institutional religion and the Kingdom in front of him when called upon to speak judgement.

Yet there is always more to fear in ignoring God's plumb-line to His church than in the constant need to be alert to God's realigning.

We know that John the Baptist felt fear and doubt as he lay in prison. His ministry had been so powerful, and his example so good, down even to the avoidance of any possible pollution of food, that Gregory of Nazianzus reflected, commenting on this passage, how someone God loved so

much and did so well, could be allowed to suffer so greatly; and if this is the case we should not be surprised or fearful by suffering ourselves for faithfulness to the Gospel.

John was faithful, yet his faithfulness led him to prison and martyrdom. Faithfulness to God over and above loyalty to society or government or custom or culture is never popular.

Whether we speak of the need for morality in society, or of the need for the poor to be loved and valued equally, (a standard which we must move towards with a true living wage for all our staff everywhere), or of the importance of the family as the base community of society, or of the intrinsic value of life at its beginnings and ends, or of the need to welcome the stranger, and for solidarity across Europe in doing so: in all of these and many more at every level, we will make ourselves unpopular.

Where do we find the antidote to fear? Where do we find the capacity to be prophets of grace and hope, joyful, fervent and clear against injustice in a world of martyrdom and torture, or of inequality and greed? Even in the days of William Temple, his call to a different model of life was ignored, mocked and opposed by the government of the time, when he brought before them the needs of the poor. The language of opposition was the same as today.

Few of us like criticising; we know that, thank God, we have much to praise in our society, much for which to give thanks, under governments of all colours now and for years past. Yet, under this and every government the church is constantly called to a loving critique of the secular powers.

Temple asked what right has the church to speak? So how do we keep our nerve, and find the way to overcome our fears and inhibitions, in love but also with passion for the poor, for the environment, for justice, for the lost, how do we obey the Spirit who sent Amos and John the Baptist?

The answer is found in that great reading of the hymn of the first chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians. Karl Barth, commenting on this passage says, 'thus it is of God alone, but of God truly and effectively, that the community of the Old and New Testaments is His people.' In other words, because the Church is created by the purpose and mind of God, and called to be His people and live His way, fear must flee, we are sent by God.

And yet even as I say that my spirit rises up and says 'but you yourself are not holy, and you are part of a church that has so much in its past and even in its present of which to be ashamed'. And so fear comes back, round the back door, and whispers 'you are unfit to speak. The church is doomed because it is not good enough'. And Paul replies: 'In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of His grace that He lavished on us.'

Of course we must acknowledge and grieve our sins, sins of commission and omission, of lack of transparency and arrogance, especially as we are aware of sins against children and vulnerable adults.

But the good news which enables us to come to the Eucharist with confidence, and hold our filthy, empty hands to find them cleansed and filled, and called to service is that God has called us, has called His church, has sanctified us, and sends us to be his prophetic people.

Once again this Sunday we meet to proclaim, to delight in, to rejoice at what God has done. This is the God who called Amos and gave him courage to challenge a Kingdom's morality and idolatry. This is the God who called John the Baptist, and gave him courage to rebuke iniquity in government. This is the God who called the church in Ephesus, drawn afresh by Paul, in one of the darker places of the Roman Empire, to see that God has forgiven their sins and given them victory over sin and death. This is the God who comes to make us and remake us.

Take courage that whilst we ourselves are without any merit, in Jesus Christ we are called, forgiven, equipped and sent.

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