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WHERE LOVE & JUSTICE MEET

The truth of Amos for today

ROY CLEMENTS

Where love and justice meet

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The truth of Amos for today

Roy Clements

To Joe Mwaniki,
a much-loved
Christian brother,
Roy Clements
Christmas
1997

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The West is on the verge of collapse created by its own hand . . . between good and evil there is an irreconcilable contradiction. One cannot build one's life, without regard to this distinction . . . We, the oppressed people of Russia, . . . watch with anguish the tragic enfeeblement of Europe. We offer you the experience of our suffering; we would like you to accept it without having to pay the monstrous price of death and slavery that we have paid.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn,
Warning to the Western World

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FOREWORD

The message of Amos is a message for today. Amos spoke vividly, forcefully and insistently to an affluent society, who could not bring themselves to believe in divine judgment. Their religious leaders were reassuring men who told them what they wanted to hear and were outraged when Amos told them the opposite.

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that those religious leaders were wrong and that Amos was right, that

> The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
> His cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold.

But the false prophets of our day tell us that the God of the Old Testament can be ignored, that, despite all Jesus' own outspoken warnings, the Christian God is a God of love only and not of judgment.

Despite the holocausts of the two world wars, in which fifty million people were killed without the aid of nuclear weapons, they believe that human society can get its act together without that fear of God which the Psalmist tells us is 'the beginning of wisdom'. Racialism and nationalism can be tamed without it. The awesome nuclear threat is more difficult to ignore, but both multilateral and unilateral disarmers look for political solutions alone to the intractable problem of international mistrust. And we cannot, of course, ignore the most recent threat of the deadly disease of AIDS; but those who dare issue moral warnings are asked whether they are really followers of the Christ

who 'dined with taxgatherers and sinners . . . who told an adulteress that he did not condemn her.' They ignore completely his call to 'go and sin no more', and his warning, 'Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.'

Christ did not repudiate the law and the prophets; he endorsed them. He came to bring salvation, as Amos foresaw, but he also spoke out just as sharply as Amos on the doom of Jewish society forty years on and of the final and eternal judgment of those who refused his gift of reconciliation with their Maker.

Dr Roy Clements does not trim his views on Amos to accommodate today's false prophets. This book is for our society just as Amos' message was for his. He speaks to us as directly as Amos, and the church in which these sermons were preached was packed, with an overflow of two or three hundred students. The written word is as gripping as the spoken; the message loses nothing of its sharpness. Our morally confused society badly needs a prophet like Amos if we are to emerge from the moral chaos which the false prophets have created, to avoid the disintegration of society and, above all, if each of us is to learn that 'the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom'.

Fred Catherwood

PREFACE

The publication of sermons in written form is never wholly satisfactory. Preaching is oral communication, and so a sermon's full impact can be experienced only by being present in the 'live' congregation at the time of its original delivery. Nevertheless, there may be some merit in offering the occasional book of sermons, if only as an example of the way preaching can still be made relevant and interesting to modern people. That at any rate is my excuse.

This volume represents a series of Sunday morning addresses given at Eden Chapel, Cambridge, during the spring of 1984. Each sermon has been transcribed with only minor editing from tapes recorded at the time. So the words on the page are substantially the *ipsissima verba* of the preacher. Inevitably, this imposes a style on the material which some may find too rhetorical. It also means that the challenge to the reader may seem on occasions too aggressively declamatory. Let me thank in advance, therefore, those who have patience to persevere with the book. God spoke to me as I prepared these sermons and it is my sincere prayer that he may speak to you through them too.

Thanks are due to a number of people who have made possible the production of the book. Pat Blake transcribed the sermons from tapes; Chris Akhurst edited them into presentable shape and other members of the Publications Sub-committee of Eden Baptist Church handled the related administration and correspondence.

I am convinced that the book of Amos has a very special

relevance to the Western world at the end of the twentieth century. First, the prophet is addressing social evils in the nation. Secondly, he is rebuking apostasy within the church, and thirdly, he is challenging individuals to repentance. I have tried to do justice to all three of these facets of application in my exposition. The key to appreciating the book is to try to identify oneself as part of the prophet's original audience in the eighth century BC. Those who succeed in that imaginative experiment will not fail to confirm, I think, the truth of the apostle's claim that 'everything that was written in the past was written to teach *us*' (Rom. 15:4).

Cambridge, 1987 *Roy Clements*

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NOBODY IS EXEMPT
Amos 1:1 – 2:16

The last straw

It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back, as the proverb rightly says. Though someone has the temperament of Job and tolerates a thousand of your insults, if you keep on provoking him, and then goad him once too often, he will repress his anger no longer. 'That's the last straw!' he will exclaim; and then, as Dryden comments in one of his poems: 'Beware the fury of a patient man.'

Patience is a virtue, but only if it is exhaustible. It is a good thing to be slow to anger, but it is not a good thing to be incapable of anger altogether. That is no sign of moral character at all. On the contrary, it indicates either moral indifference or moral cowardice. The only camel that never reaches its final tolerance limit is the camel with no back to be broken.

So too, the only person whose indignation can never be aroused, no matter how intense the provocation, is a moral jellyfish. Anyone who is both good and strong will suffer long, it is true, but he will not suffer interminably. His patience, though great, will be exhaustible. The possibility of exceeding that last straw will always be there to menace anybody who seeks to exploit his forbearance, mistaking it for spinelessness.

The principal lesson of the book of Amos is simply this, that that which is true of people who are both good and strong is also true of God. His patience is vast, far greater than ours, but it is not the patience of a moral invertebrate. God is no jellyfish. He has spine, and, because he has spine, his patience, unlike some of his other divine attributes, is not infinite. God can come to the end of his tether. He can be provoked once too often. He can, and sometimes does, say, 'That is the last straw!' And the book of Amos is the record of just such an occasion in the history of the people of Israel: a moment when God's patience ran out.

The historical context

The opening verse of chapter 1 tells us exactly what the historical context of this book was. It was, we are told, during the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah, and Jeroboam II, king of Israel, that Amos stepped on to the plain of history, somewhere in the latter part of the first half of the eighth century BC. Archaeologists who think they may have identified the remnants of the earthquake mentioned in verse 1 date it around 760 BC.

We know that this was a period of economic prosperity for Israel. All her traditional enemies were weak and for the moment there was no superpower on the horizon to threaten her. So Jeroboam II's capital city in Samaria oozed with prestigious building projects and luxury imported goods.

But morally and spiritually, the situation was far less optimistic. This was partly as a result of the habitual flirtations of the people of Israel with Canaanite religion, and partly as a result of the materialistic affluence which had gripped the heart of the ruling classes in Israel. Moral standards were declining very fast in the country. Israel was beginning to assume the classic marks of a decadent

society. That was the situation, then, into which Amos was propelled as prophet.

Amos: a remarkable man

Verse 1 also tells us something about Amos himself: he was 'one of the shepherds of Tekoa'. That means he was a remarkable man. First of all, he was not a religious professional. He had had no theological training. He was not even a priest. His early experience had been entirely confined to sheep-farming – not the sort of fellow you expect suddenly to take it into his head to go out open-air preaching. He was very much an amateur prophet.

He was remarkable for a second reason, too. Rather like his contemporary, Jonah, he was one of the first missionaries of the Bible. Tekoa, from where he came, was a village near Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah. But all his public ministry was conducted across the border in the northern kingdom of Israel.

Soon after the end of Solomon's reign, Israel had been divided into two kingdoms, Judah and Israel, and in the time of Amos relations between these two were far from cordial. Feelings had been very deeply embittered. Some years before, a fellow called Jehu had established himself as king of Israel by assassinating both the monarch of Israel and the monarch of Judah. Jehoash, who is mentioned in verse 1, was this Jehu's grandson. Demonstrating that things had not changed greatly in those two generations, the author of Kings tells us that Jehoash distinguished himself by invading Judah, routing her army and pillaging the temple (2 Ki. 14:11–14). So it is clear that, in 760 BC, Israel would have been regarded with deep suspicion and resentment by the population of Judah, Amos's home country. Yet it was to Israel that Amos went – an example of missionary spirit if ever there was one.

The message

Amos's courage is all the more dramatic when one realizes the message that he was commissioned to proclaim there. It is summarized for us in verse 2: 'The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers.' Not a comfortable, encouraging, conciliatory message! Amos's word from God was that Israel's affluence was going to be very short-lived. God was not cooing at her like an indulgent father. He was, says Amos, bellowing at her like a fire-breathing dragon. From his temple in Jerusalem his face was turned due north, and a searing blast was being emitted, consuming to ashes everything in its path from the fertile pasture land in the valleys to the luxuriant vegetation covering the hills.

Why this explosion of divine rage? The reason is obvious, says Amos: God has lost his patience. Amos has a fascinating way of bringing this out through a repeated format in these two chapters. There are eight oracles in all, and each one is structured identically: 'For three sins . . . even for four, I will not turn back my wrath . . . I will send fire' (1:3).

Seven times that format is repeated. Amos is asking if anybody is going to escape the inferno of judgment that God is about to fling out upon the world. The answer, he says, is 'no', because every nation in the Middle East has in one way or another provoked God beyond further endurance. They have pushed him too far, God has been lenient too long. It is the last straw. 'For three sins, no, for four, I will not call back my wrath this time. I will send fire on them, and on them, and on them. No-one is exempt: no-one.' We need to keep this framework in mind as we consider the eight oracles.

In the first six (1:3 – 2:3) we see the God who judges

others. Then in the two that follow (2:4–16) we come to the God who judges us.

The God who judges others

Syria

'For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath' (1:3). Amos begins his survey of the nations against whom God is directing his fiery roar with Syria, identified by both her capital city, Damascus, and her kings Hazael and Ben-Hadad, mentioned in verse 4.

The last straw as far as Syria was concerned, says the Lord, was her ruthlessness toward the conquered people of Gilead: 'Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth . . .' (1:3). That can be taken literally, in which case Amos is referring to a barbaric form of torture, but it is more likely to be a metaphor. He is perhaps describing the cruel pillaging of the country by invading troops or the pitiless commercial exploitation of the region's economy by Syrian tax demands. Either way, says Amos, God has been pushed too far by this cruelty: 'I will send fire upon the house of Hazael that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad' (1:4). God expects even heathen people such as the Syrians to temper their military conquests with compassion and mercy. Those who cannot be generous in victory will not be victors for long.

Philistia

'For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath' (1:6). The Philistines were a conglomeration of city states: Gaza was one of the chief. Three others are mentioned: Ashdod, Ashkelon and Ekron. What was the last straw as far as the Philistines were concerned? It was slave-trading, and that on a grand scale.

' "Because she took captive whole communities and sold

them to Edom, I will send fire upon the walls of Gaza that will consume her fortresses. I will destroy the king of Ashdod and the one who holds the sceptre in Ashkelon. I will turn my hand against Ekron till the last of the Philistines is dead," says the Sovereign Lord' (1:6–8). You've done it once too often, says Amos. God expects even pagans such as the Philistines to recognize the inviolability of basic human rights. People matter to God, and he will not indefinitely bless nations that deny them their common human dignity. This is something that many regimes might take note of today.

Phoenicia

'For three sins of Tyre, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath' (1:9). The principal Phoenician port of Tyre was almost a kingdom on its own. What was the last straw as far as God's patience was concerned in her case? It was slave-trading once again – but this time compounded with something else: defiance of an international alliance. 'Because she sold whole communities of captives to Edom, disregarding a treaty of brotherhood, I will send fire upon the walls of Tyre that will consume her fortresses' (1:9–10).

No, God will sit back no longer. Fidelity to a pledged word matters to God. He expects even idolatrous cities such as Tyre to be true to their promises. A lesson all diplomats could profit from.

Edom

'For three sins of Edom, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath' (1:11). Edom was a kingdom to the south east of Israel, and Teman and Bozrah, mentioned in verse 12, were her two principal strongholds. What was Edom's fourth sin? It was implacable hostility towards a neighbouring state.

'Because he pursued his brother with a sword, stifling all compassion, because his anger raged continually and his

fury flamed unchecked . . .' (1:11). The brother in question was almost certainly Israel, because Edom was traditionally a descendant of Esau, Jacob's twin. Israel was not her natural enemy, says Amos, but Edom had relentlessly harassed her. Now God had noticed and it was the last straw. '. . . I will send fire upon Teman that will consume the fortresses of Bozrah' (1:12). God expects even disadvantaged mongrels, as were the Edomites, to know how to swallow their pride and stifle revenge and make peace. He cannot abide perpetual war-mongering. A lesson perhaps that those who are protagonists in the world's trouble spots ought to take notice of today.

Ammon

'For three sins of Ammon, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath' (1:13). Here we have another monarchy ethnically related to Israel, this time on her east. The region is now called Jordan, and the capital, Rabbah, mentioned in verse 14, is the city we know as Amman. What was her last-straw transgression? It was expansionist territorial ambition pursued through terrorism.

'Because he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders, I will set fire to the walls of Rabbah that will consume her fortresses' (1:13–14). We must not be misled, God is no pacifist. He knows that war is sometimes inevitable in a fallen world. But there is a difference between war and atrocity, and he expects even pagans to respect the distinction. He expects even militaristic tribesmen such as the Ammonites to realize that there are such things as war crimes. He will not spare any group that pursues territorial claims by the tactics of international terrorism. Present-day terrorist leaders could do well to reflect on that.

Moab

'For three sins of Moab, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath' (2:1). Moab was a southern neighbour of Ammon. She too had pushed God's patience too far, says Amos. In her case the final provocation was a little more unusual. It was an act of sacrilege against the honoured dead of their enemy. 'Because he burned, as if to lime, the bones of Edom's king . . .' (2:1).

Cremation was widely regarded in Middle Eastern culture as an act of gross disrespect to the dead. In the law of Moses it was prescribed only for certain serious crimes. It may be therefore, that Amos simply implies here that the Moabites desecrated the royal tomb of Edom and disposed of the king's corpse in a way that was fitting only for a criminal. But in view of an incident recorded in 2 Kings 3, I think it more likely that Moab actually captured a royal prince, and instead of executing him in the noble way, decided to add to his humiliation by publicly immolating him by fire. This is especially likely when we remember that human sacrifice was a feature of Moabite religion. Whatever the precise nature of the crime, though, it is quite clear that it was pointless. It achieved no military purpose, and it was dishonourable, because it was carried out in a quite unnecessarily offensive manner. As far as God was concerned, it was a step too far. He expects even brutal regimes, like that of the Moabites, to know better than to engage in that kind of outrage, designed as it was only to exacerbate an already vicious vendetta between these two countries. God detests arbitrary acts of spite.

'. . . I will send fire upon Moab . . . Moab will go down in great tumult amid war cries' (2:2): a warning that both sides in the Northern Ireland conflict could heed.

Six nations, then – Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon and Moab – together formed a complete circle

round the borders of Israel. Each one of them, according to Amos, was ripe for judgment.

The lesson

Here is our first lesson: God judges others. There is, I think, a measure of comfort in that. When we see brutal acts in the world, violence in our capital cities, mass murder, racist oppression, and tyranny, it is very easy to be demoralized by a feeling of helplessness. 'What is God doing?' we ask. Amos has the answer. God is being patient. It is in his nature to give people an awful lot of rope, but, be assured of this, he will not be patient for ever. Three transgressions he may tolerate, but the fourth will prove the last straw. Remember what Dryden said: 'Beware the fury of a patient man.' He might also have said: 'Beware the fury of a patient God'!

Not one of these nations had a Bible. Not one of them had ever been favoured with a special revelation of God's will. But that ignorance was not regarded by God as an excuse. He judged them just the same because, as the apostle Paul spelt out very clearly in the early chapters of his letter to the Romans (1:18–20; 2:14–15), we don't need a Bible in order to be accountable to our Maker. Every one of us has a conscience, and that is enough.

Amos does not complain here about the idolatry of the surrounding nations. At this particular stage in God's purposes for the world, God was turning a blind eye to that; Paul tells us so explicitly in Acts 17:30. Not until Jesus was raised and the doors of the kingdom were opened wide to the Gentiles would God send out his spokesmen to command pagan nations to repent of their false religion. That was not the issue, as far as Amos was concerned. It was not the idolatry of these nations that provoked God beyond his endurance, but their crimes against humanity. It was their disregard for people that goaded his patience to

the limit; their brutality, their treachery, their exploitation, their needless aggression. They didn't need a Bible to tell them that those things were wrong; their conscience should have done so. And if that was so in the eighth century BC, is it not true today?

If Amos were among us in our contemporary world I personally doubt whether he would be expending his breath on the awfulness of the erection of a mosque in Regent's Park, London, or the lack of time given to religious education in schools, or even the lack of religious freedom behind the Iron Curtain. I do not think they would be the primary issues for him. No, it would be the cruelty, the injustice, the dehumanization of our world that would worry him. In his own day, he was campaigning not for a world in which everybody would worship Yahweh, but for one in which everybody would recognize the difference between right and wrong. God would judge the nations, not because they were pagan, but because they were inhuman. In a day when the church is at last learning the importance of Christian social comment, within a pluralist society that may be a significant observation.

But lest we get too smug and complacent, we must move on, because Amos's citation is not complete; it catalogued eight nations and we have looked at only six. It is from the last two that perhaps the most important implications of these two chapters derive.

The God who judges us

God judges others, yes, he certainly does. There is comfort in that; but, Amos warns, God also judges us.

Amos's Israelite congregation must have gained a measure of grim satisfaction from his sermon up to this point. Every one of these nations against whom Amos is roaring so ominously was an enemy. It is not hard to imagine the favourable comments that must have been

circulating as, one by one, he pronounces their doom: 'Serve them right, those Syrians.' 'About time, too – those Philistines.' 'What has Moab ever done to help us?' And so on. Indeed, since sanctified patriotism was the stock-in-trade of the majority of professional prophets at this time, Amos's address must have sounded pretty conventional. Then, quite suddenly, he drops a bombshell.

Judah, too

'For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath' (2:4).

'Judah is on the list, too! But, wait a minute, Amos, you can't be serious. You come from Judah, don't you? Being a bit hard on yourself, aren't you?' But the shepherd preacher is adamant: Judah too had exceeded the limit of God's patience, and, with commendable objectivity, Amos is not embarrassed to say so.

He also tells us why: 'Because they have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his decrees' (2:4). That is immensely important. Judah was not an ordinary nation like the other six. She represented the covenant people of God. She had the temple. She had the royal line of David. Above all, she had the Scriptures. In other words, Judah in the Old Testament was not just a model of nationhood, she was the model of the church. What Amos is saying here in verses 4 and 5 is that God judges the church. The Bible in the pew does not immunize her against God's indignation. It is obedience to that inspired book that he wants to see, not merely the possession of it. In Judah in Amos's day, that obedience was lacking: 'they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestory followed' (2:4). The Hebrew actually says, 'led astray by *lies*'. In other words, instead of constantly referring back to the normative revelation God had given in Scripture, Judah had allowed herself to be shaped by culture and tradition, 'the lies her ancestors had followed'. So, bit by bit, truth

was substituted by error and, no doubt, Yahweh by idols of their own imagination. And, says Amos, God will not put up with that in his church for ever. He expects reformation according to the Scriptures to be a constant activity among his people. He expects them to be constantly looking back at the Bible, finding out where they have been going wrong (or where their fathers have been going wrong), and putting it right. He does not accept that we are just the victims of our environment, of our traditions, of our culture. He expects us to be discerning about those traditions and that culture. When we fail to be so, this is what he says: 'I will send fire upon Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem' (2:5).

How ironic that is! It was from Jerusalem that Yahweh was announcing this fiery judgment. It was from Jerusalem that he was breathing fire towards Carmel; and yet, says Amos, that very judgment is going to boomerang back on Jerusalem if she is not careful. Nobody is exempt. God judges others: he will also judge us. He will even judge our church.

Amos's willingness to stand up in Israel, against whom Judah cherished so much bitterness at that time, and denounce his own home-country in this way, exemplifies one of the most vital qualities any evangelist must have: that of cultural self-criticism. If we want to proclaim a message of judgment to other people, we must first be willing to apply that same message without qualification or extenuation to ourselves. We cannot afford jingoistic prejudices. If we want to denounce the sins of the communist East, we must first be willing to identify the sins of our own capitalist West. If we would complain of the materialism of working-class values, we must first be willing to castigate the materialism of middle-class values (or vice versa, depending on our class identity). If we would condemn the immorality of the world, we must first show ourselves willing to condemn the immorality of the

church. Nothing will undermine the credibility of our message more radically than the sort of hypocrisy that fails to acknowledge the impartiality of God's judgment. Conversely, nothing will establish the credibility of our message more radically than the integrity that is willing to admit candidly that God not only judges others, he judges us. Amos had that integrity. His audience must have been both stunned and gratified to hear a man so willing to admit the failings of his own parent culture. Perhaps they even applauded. 'Well said! An honest Judean for a change.' 'Glad to see you have no illusions about your own tribe, Amos.' 'Emigrated, have you?'

How suddenly the clapping hands must have frozen and the smiles died on their lips when they realized that Amos had still not reached the top of his octave.

. . . and Israel

'For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath' (2:6).

'By heaven, Amos, you have gone too far this time! Talk about the sins of our enemies, by all means. Talk about the sins of your own country if you must. But don't put *us* in that category. What a cheek!'

Amos does not flinch. With the skill of a master strategist he has prepared this bombshell and his hearers have walked straight into its blast. He has wooed their ears by talking about everybody else. 'I tell you,' he says, 'God will judge the pagan.' All cheer. 'God will judge the church.' All applaud. 'God will judge you. Don't you realize?' he says, 'When God's patience runs out, nobody is exempt; not even you.'

The charge sheet

It is important that we notice the particular charges of which Israel stood accused, because it is a theme we are

going to encounter again and again in Amos. We can sum it up in one phrase: social injustice.

'They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals' (2:6). That word 'sell' takes us back into the issue of slavery once again; but it is very unlikely that Amos is referring to the international slave trade here, as he was earlier on. In Israel the commonest reason for a person's becoming a slave was failure to pay his debts. The courts could order a bankrupt to sell himself as a slave in order to compensate his creditors. What Amos is suggesting here is that this judicial penalty was being imposed in defiance of the demands both of justice and compassion. The righteous and the needy were being sold in this way 'for silver . . . for a pair of sandals'. This could mean simply that people were being enslaved for paltry debts, such as the price of a pair of shoes. But in Israel, sandals were conventionally exchanged as a token of the transfer of property. It was a way of signing a contract, if you like. So Amos is may well be saying here that the courts were riddled with bribery. 'Silver', that is, money, or 'a pair of sandals', that is, land or property, were the things that bought you a favourable verdict. All that innocence or poverty guaranteed you was the loss of your liberty.

Verse 7 spells it out most clearly: 'They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.' The charge is judicial corruption, then. Israel was becoming the sort of place where, provided you had enough money, you could get away with anything. Consequently, the poor got poorer and the rich got richer. Economic polarization widened until it became economic oppression, and as if that were not enough, Amos tells us, it was all compounded with an obsession for sexual immorality.

'Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name . . .' (2:7). Possibly Amos is just referring to

promiscuity, made all the worse because parents' standards of behaviour were no better than those of their children. It was not just a case of adolescents sowing their wild oats before settling down into a stable and faithful marriage. No, fathers and sons conspired together to commit fornication and adultery. I suspect, though, that verse 8 is all part of the same scene, and if that is so, it is not just promiscuity that Amos is referring to, but cult prostitution: 'They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines' (2:8). The shrines of Canaanite gods of fertility were often little more than brothels, and we know from the writing of Hosea (*e.g.* 4:10–14) that such shrines were proliferating at this time in Israel. So it is most likely that Amos is depicting here in verses 6–8 a cameo of a typical Israelite family in the mid-eighth century.

'Here is a wealthy man,' he says. 'Every day he sits in the courts as a justice of the peace and adds to his wealth the property and the money from the inducements he has corruptly accepted in that role. When he comes home, he is laden with drink which he has confiscated as fines from those too high-principled to pay the bribe. In his spare time he is a pawnbroker, willing to take the very clothes off the back of the poor as security against the loans which he knows they will never be able to repay. "Come on, son," he says, "let's go to the strip-club tonight." So together they take themselves off to the shrine of some fertility goddess for an evening of sensuality and debauchery, and', says Amos, 'the very clothes they take off, the very alcohol they drink and the very money they spend have all been obtained by extortion. Their self-indulgence is entirely financed out of corruption and exploitation, and you complain that God should think of judging you!'

We might argue, and with some justification, that these crimes were nowhere near as vicious as the barbarism that

was cited earlier against those pagan nations, so why should God's patience be broken by them? The answer is simple. The more blessing God bestows, the fewer concessions he is prepared to make. Jesus said, 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded' (Lk. 12:48). Israel was a case in point: look at what God had done for them: 'I destroyed the Amorite before them, though he was as tall as the cedars and as strong as the oaks. I destroyed his fruit above and his roots below' (2:9).

He had delivered the Israelites. Their national independence was a direct result of his saving initiative. More than that, 'I also raised up prophets from among your sons and Nazirites from among your young men' (2:11). God had revealed himself to Israel. Their national culture had been formed by his personal calling of key leaders who had shaped the nation's life. No other nation had enjoyed such privilege, such opportunity, or such education. Yet Israel had treated it all with contempt. The blessings were forgotten, even despised: 'But you made the Nazirites drink wine and you commanded the prophets not to prophesy' (2:12).

That is why God had lost patience with Israel. Their crime was more heinous than the most appalling pagan atrocity because it was compounded with ingratitude. If there is one thing more damning than receiving no grace from God, it is this: to receive God's grace in vain.

The judgment

'Now then, I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain' (2:13). Like the laden wagons that represented Israel's economic boom, so the harvest of divine retribution which they had been so carelessly accumulating would soon pulverize their national pride. All their military might would not save them. Not the skill of their men at arms,

not their strategic genius, not their modern weaponry, not their soldierly courage – nothing could avert the military defeat that awaited them.

' "The swift will not escape, the strong will not muster their strength, and the warrior will not save his life. The archer will not stand his ground, the fleet-footed soldier will not get away, and the horseman will not save his life. Even the bravest warriors will flee naked on that day," declares the Lord' (2:14–16). They had gone too far. It was the last straw. They would learn to their cost that God not only judges others, he judges us.

The second lesson

There is a most solemn warning in these two chapters for us today. It is a warning to our nation or even to our entire Western civilization. For what Amos is saying here, not once, not twice, but eight times over, is this: God judges *societies*. That is quite clear. No doubt God could discern righteous men and women in these eight kingdoms he cites, as he identified Lot in the city of Sodom. But their presence was not enough to turn aside his wrath. There are times when God says of an entire city, or even an entire nation: 'That is the last straw. That is the fourth sin. I will send fire.'

That means that it is not enough for Christians to treat history as if it were simply the product of social and economic forces. What this passage is teaching us is that there is a moral component in history, too. I do not say that a secular historian could not find perfectly good explanations for the decline of Syria or the fall of Tyre. The emergence of an Assyrian military genius called Tiglath-pileser III in 745 BC marked the beginning of an Assyrian empire which was responsible, humanly speaking, for the total fulfilment of this prophecy of Amos. Yet as far as Amos and the other eighth-century prophets were concerned, the Assyrian rise

to power was no historical accident. Assyria was, as Isaiah would later call her, the rod of God's anger (Is. 10:5). She was the instrument of God's retributive judgment on these nations which had for too long tried his patience.

If that was the way prophets in the eighth century saw history, surely it is the way that people of faith must see history today. We dare not surrender to political pragmatism. The universe is not ruled by a mindless moral jellyfish, but by a King of Righteousness who judges among the nations and who will judge our nation too.

How will he evaluate the West today? First, he will evaluate her by the standard of a *universal moral conscience*. There is never any excuse for crimes against common humanity. Cruelty, war-mongering, exploitation of the weak – we do not need a Bible to know that such things are wrong. He will judge any society on these counts. But more than that, he will also judge us by the standard of our *particular spiritual privileges*. In this gospel day, the Bible is no longer the unique possession of Israel and Judah. God has blessed Gentile nations too with the light of his word.

We can see in the history of Britain evidence of enormous blessings. For a thousand years now Christianity has been the official religion of this land. We were delivered from paganism in the distant past, from Islam in the Middle Ages, from apostate Catholisicm in the sixteenth century and from Fascist and Marxist dictatorships in the twentieth century. God can say to us as he said to Israel of old, 'I destroyed the Amorites before them, though he was as tall as the cedars' (2:9).

More than that, he has blessed us with preachers of extraordinary power and influence; godly people who have repeatedly called us as a nation to place ourselves under the authority of God; martyrs who have died to bring the Bible to us; evangelists who have spent their lives promoting revival. We see churches and chapels as a result

of all this in every city, town and village. God says to us, as he said to Israel, 'I also raised up prophets from among your sons and Nazirites from among your young men' (2:11). He did not have to do any of this. We are a privileged people, and, that being so, we dare not indulge in self-congratulatory complacency.

Maybe we can point to nations in the world far worse than ours. So could Israel, yet God still judged her, not because she was worse in absolute terms than others, but because, in view of her spiritual privileges, she should have been so much better. It behoves us all, like Amos, to examine seriously our society in a spirit of frank self-criticism. Ultimately, our national destiny hinges not on whether we have nuclear missiles or unilateral disarmament, or on whether we have monetarist or Keynesian economics, or on whether we stay in the EEC or withdraw from it. The final question that seals our fate as a society is whether we are a nation where right and wrong matter, or where 'anything goes'. God judges other nations and he will judge us. In a world littered with the wrecks of civilizations and empires, there is nothing particularly immortal about Great Britain or any other Western nation.

2

THE END OF PROSPERITY
Amos 3:1–15

Prosperous times

Have you noticed how expert we are all becoming in the field of economics? A couple of decades ago if you had asked the man in the street what a balance-of-payments deficit was, he might have guessed it had something to do with being behind on the hire purchase. As for inflation, he would probably have thought that it was what you did to balloons. Today, though, everybody is familiar with these technical terms. Exchange rate, interest rate, unemployment rate, *Financial Times* index, Dow-Jones index, cost-of-living index, the state of the money supply, the level of average earnings, the growth in the GNP – we are bombarded with such statistics practically every day. As for economic forecasts, they are almost as popular as horoscopes. Hardly a week goes by without the CBI or the TUC or some bright young gang of Stock Market consultants publishing their computer predictions on prime-time television. All this interest is one very good reason why Amos is such a contemporary and relevant book for us, for he, too, was immensely interested in economics and in economic forecasts in particular.

He lived when Jeroboam II was king of Israel, and, as we noticed in the previous chapter, those were particularly

prosperous days. There was a great deal of money around, at least in the pockets of the urban aristocracy. All over the capital city of Samaria prestigious buildings were going up. Some of them were what Amos calls in verse 10 'fortresses', that is, multistoreyed strongholds used both as residential mansions and as citadels of defence. They were a kind of eighth-century-BC equivalent of medieval castles, I suppose: barons' residences.

Other buildings were more in the nature of luxury holiday accommodation: what Amos calls in 3:15 'the summer house'. This was not a glass construction for growing plants in, but, elegantly designed with ivory-inlaid walls and silk-covered soft furnishings, it was the Israelite equivalent of that little place in the country where the Duke takes his friends for a bit of hunting, shooting and fishing at the weekend.

Archaeologists' excavations of Samaria have abundantly confirmed that Amos was not exaggerating the prosperity enjoyed by the upper classes at this time. Israel under Jeroboam II basked in little short of the splendour she had possessed two centuries earlier under King Solomon. So it is not difficult to imagine the general mood of confidence that must have prevailed amongst the business tycoons of the period. Shares were booming, the shekel was at an all-time high, international trade had never been more buoyant. Every economic indicator looked encouraging. To echo that famous slogan of British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, they had never had it so good.

The only fly in the ointment was Amos. He alone of all the economic forecasters in Israel was pessimistic. A real Eeyore was Amos. 'It isn't going to last, you know,' he said. 'Before this generation is out, all this affluence will be gone. The nation's prosperity is coming to an end.' Amos's purpose here was to explain to these sanguine and complacent Israelites why he was so sure about that.

No privilege without responsibility

'Hear this word the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel – against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" ' (3:1–2).

Amos hadn't studied under Maynard Keynes or Milton Friedman. He had learnt his economics at the feet of a man called Moses, and I suspect that, if he were with us today in the twentieth century, he would still reckon Moses a sounder tutor than either of them. For Moses was convinced of a principle which would be laughed to scorn by secular economists of our day of whatever school, namely, that there is an inevitable link in any nation's experience between prosperity and morality. For example, this was the advice Moses gave to the people of Israel, before they entered the promised land:

> If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands that I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth . . . You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country . . . the crops of your land and the young of your livestock . . . your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed . . . The Lord your God will bless you . . . You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. The Lord will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. . . . However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands . . . all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and

your kneading trough will be cursed . . . the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds. . . . A people that you do not know will eat what your land and labour produce, and you will have nothing but cruel oppression all your days. . . . The alien . . . will rise above you higher and higher, but you will sink lower and lower. He will lend to you, but you will not lend to him. He will be the head, but you will be the tail. . . . If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law . . . and do not revere this glorious and awesome name – the Lord your God – the Lord will send fearful plagues on you. . . . Just as it pleased the Lord to make you prosper . . . so it will please him to ruin and destroy you (Dt. 28:1, 3–5, 8, 12–13, 15–18, 33, 43–44, 58–59, 63).

It was words like these, centuries old though they were when Amos heard or read them, which were the source of his economic theory. He belonged the the pre-classical school of economics. For him economics was not a science but a department of social ethics. He knew Israel to be an enormously privileged nation, and that privilege brought with it the possibility of untold material benefits. But they were conditional benefits.

'If you fully obey the Lord your God' (Dt. 28:1) – that's what Moses had said; and Israel in Amos's day was in danger of forgetting that vital 'if'.

The privilege

In 3:1–2 Amos reminds his hearers of the privileges they had had. They had enjoyed the privilege of adoption, for a start. A family, God calls them: 'the *family* I brought up out of Egypt'. God had decided to regard the Israelites as his own children, to be a father to them.

They had had the privilege of salvation, secondly: 'the

family *I brought up out of Egypt*'. When she had been hopelessly enslaved by a Middle Eastern superpower, he had personally intervened to rescue her and restore her independence.

Then there was the privilege of election, too: 'You only have I chosen.' The Hebrew literally means 'You only have I *known*', a word implying total personal commitment. Her experience of God had been an extraordinarily intimate one, and, says Amos, all these honours were unique to Israel: 'You *only* . . . of all the families of the earth.' To use the theological jargon of a previous generation, Israel was the beneficiary of a *particular redemption*. The blessings to which she was heir were not available to the world at large. They were not general blessings; they were particular to her. She alone of all the nations was placed by God in this special relationship to him.

The responsibilities

Could Israel, then, sit back in smug complacency? Was the continuance of her prosperity guaranteed against all eventualities by this divine favour? Undoubtedly, some of Amos's contemporaries were thinking in those terms. But Amos himself is concerned to expose such hopes for the illusions they were. 'Don't you realize', he says, 'that all this privilege brings responsibility? If you fail to fulfil God's moral conditions, then it will not be the economic blessings of his covenant that you receive, but the economic curses.' 'You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins' (3:2).

This is a very important lesson for every Christian to learn. Like Israel, we have been adopted into God's family. He has called us sons of God. Like Israel, we have been saved from bondage, delivered from our sins. Like Israel, we are God's elect, chosen in Christ before the creation of

the world (Eph. 1:4). Like Israel, we are the recipients of a particular redemption. It was for us personally, his sheep, that Christ died. God draws a line between the church and the world, just as he drew a line between Israel and the nations in Amos's day. 'You only have I chosen,' he says.

But we dare not mistake that divine grace that has been bestowed upon us for a judicial bias in our favour. There is no partiality with God where morals are concerned. God has never promised to pardon the impenitently sinful. On the contrary, in certain respects he is harder on his own people than he is on anybody else. Notice that word 'therefore': 'You only have I chosen, . . . *therefore* I will punish you.' Our Christian experience is a privilege, but like all privilege it brings responsibility. So the apostle Paul says, 'Live a life worthy of the calling you have received' (Eph. 4:1). 'If you love me,' says Jesus, 'you will obey what I command' (Jn. 14:15). 'If you think you are standing firm,' warns Paul, 'be careful that you don't fall!' (1 Cor. 10:14).

I don't want to be misunderstood on this point: I am not saying that a truly converted man or woman can forfeit eternal life. Of course, there are some Christians who believe such a thing is possible. They say you can be saved, and then sin in such a manner as to lose that salvation. That being so, it is not surprising that some commentators seek to interpret Amos in a similar manner. He is predicting the end of the covenant, they argue. He believes that the special relationship between Israel and God is going to be finished. But a close reading of Amos actually makes it plain that that is not so.

This is an important point, and we need only read on to chapter 9 to be convinced of it: ' "Surely the eyes of the Sovereign Lord are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth – yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob," declares the Lord. "For I will give the command, and I will shake the house of Israel amongst all the nations as corn is shaken in a sieve, but not an ear

will fall to the ground" ' (9:8–9).

It is clear from these verses that the punishment that Amos is talking about here, though he speaks of it in such strong terms, will be a refining and a chastening experience for Israel, not a final and irrevocable abandonment. In fact that is what we ought to expect from our wider knowledge of the Bible. If you read carefully that passage in Deuteronomy quoted earlier (Dt. 28), you will discover that Moses nowhere says that the special relationship God had with Israel was conditional. He says it is the *blessings* of the covenant that are conditional. Israel in Amos's day was in danger of losing not the covenant itself, but the blessings of the covenant. And that is what any backsliding Christian is in danger of losing too.

We cannot sin with impunity. God treats sin in Christian lives even more seriously than he treats sin in the world; not because he is fickle, but precisely because he is so committed to us. As the writer to the Hebrews says: 'The Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son' (Heb. 12:6). Yes, we are adopted into God's family, but he will have no spoilt children. So we must heed Amos' advice here and not be complacent about sin in our lives. We must deal with it ruthlessly, for there is no privilege without responsibility. 'You only have I chosen, . . . therefore I will punish . . .'

In their original context, though, these verses refer not to individuals, but to an entire society. It is important that we should not lose sight of that. Privileged nations experience the chastening punishment of God, as well as privileged persons. And that is where the subject of economics comes in.

No smoke without fire

'Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so? Does a lion roar in the thicket when he has no prey? Does

he growl in his den when he has caught nothing? Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground where no snare has been set? Does a trap spring up from the earth when there is nothing to catch? When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?' (3:3–6).

One of the things that strikes you as you read Amos all the way through is the distinct impression that his audience was indifferent or perhaps even hostile to him. He has to exploit constantly all the skills of an orator to keep their sympathetic attention. We noticed this in our consideration of chapters 1 and 2. There he aroused interest among his listeners by conducting an imaginary tour of all the surrounding enemy nations with assurances that God was going to judge them all. Then he finally sprung his trap on his audience by announcing the fate of their own country too. If he had issued his condemnation of them right at the beginning, announcing, 'You are all doomed!', he would have been shouted down immediately.

The same tactic is evident in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 3, although it is masked unfortunately by the translation 'against' in verse 1. Amos does not actually say, 'Hear this word the Lord has spoken *against* you.' He says, 'Hear this word the Lord has spoken *about* you.' There is no direct hint at the beginning of the chapter of the coming indictment. In fact, it sounds reassuring and complimentary until you get to that ominous 'therefore' in the middle of verse 2, '*therefore* I will punish you': only then comes the shock. Once again, Amos drops his bombshell on ears he had just previously been flattering.

In riddles

The same principle is at work in verses 3 to 8. The clue to understanding them is to realize that Amos is softening up his audience. This time he is doing it in a way which,

though very appropriate to the culture from which he came, is unusual from our point of view.

One of the features of Middle Eastern people, even today, is that they love riddles and proverbs. The more tantalizing the riddle the better. Often they make clever use of metaphor and simile, drawing obscure analogies in order to make some subtle point. The idea is that you arouse the curiosity of your listeners by challenging them to solve your riddle, and so to understand your meaning. A real sage could keep his audience spellbound for hours by this kind of verbal game. Biblical literature is not short of examples: that is what the book of Proverbs is; and it is the background, too, to the parables of Jesus, those dark sayings which he used to tantalize his listeners. Clearly, Amos was no mean performer at this game of wit: 'Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?' (3:3) he asks his audience. He is luring them with brain-teasers. Imagine passers-by halting as they go into the market place, scratching their heads: 'Oh, that's a good one!' 'What's he getting at?' 'Ask us another, Amos!'

'Does a lion roar in the thicket when he has no prey? Does he growl in his den when he has caught nothing?' (3:4). Again he adds to their perplexity, heaping conundrum upon conundrum. 'Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground where no snare has been set? Does a trap spring up from the earth when there is nothing to catch? When a trumpet sounds in the city, do not the people tremble?' (3:5–6).

'All right! All right!' They are bursting with inquisitiveness by this time: 'What is the answer?' 'We give up.' 'Tell us the riddle.' So he does, and once again reveals the sting in the tail. His audience would so much have preferred the solution to be otherwise, but this cunning rhetorical device brings home his point with resounding force: 'When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it? Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan

to his servants the prophets' (3:6–7).

Amos is making two points, then, in this string of riddles: one about the nature of God and the second about the role of a prophet. We can sum up both in a common proverb of our own: 'No smoke without fire.'

No effect without a cause

'That is true,' says Amos, 'in every area of human experience. If people meet, it is because they have made an appointment. If a lion roars it is because he has made a kill. If an animal trap is sprung, it is because something has been snared. If a trumpet is blown, it is because an enemy has been sighted. Every effect has a corresponding cause. Every warning signal has a corresponding danger. There is no smoke without fire. What you Israelites must realize is that what is true of ordinary, day-to-day life is true also of history. There is no smoke without fire there, either: no effect without a cause.'

'When disaster comes to a city,' he says, 'has not the Lord caused it?' Amos did not believe in coincidences or in bad luck. He believed in divine providence. There is nothing fortuitous or accidental about such political catastrophes: they too are planned. Hasn't the Lord caused it? God is the fire behind the political smoke.

No warning without danger

Similarly, there is no warning signal in history without a corresponding danger.

'Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared – who will not fear? The Sovereign Lord has spoken – who can but prophesy?' (3:7–8). When a lion intends to pounce, he roars; when a city is under attack, the trumpet blows: and a prophet is a person appointed by God simi-

larly to warn people of God's intentions in history. To others the divine plan may seem veiled and mysterious, even arbitrary and unjust, but the prophet has been taken up into the secret counsels of God and he understands what is happening. He perceives what God is saying in the situation and he reports it. That is why he is so special. He is the trumpet that alerts the city. He is the roar that announces the lion. He is the smoke that gives warning of the fire.

'Make no mistake about it, Israel,' he says, 'there is no smoke without fire. What are you going to do about it? If God is raising up prophets it can only mean one thing; a disaster is planned. A sovereign God has appointed judgment upon the land. How is it, then, that you can remain so blissfully unafraid?'

A lesson for us

Once again there is immense relevance in all this for us. There are still people, even today, who are enmeshed in the perennial superstition that God is a remote heavenly benefactor. He rarely interferes in affairs here on earth, and if he does, it is always to do something agreeable, such as healing the sick. Isn't that most people's idea of God? It bears an uncanny resemblance to Santa Claus, an avuncular philanthropist who can be relied upon to intrude upon our lives no more than once a year, and then only to be kind to us.

And that is why (in spite of the fact that, according to the opinion polls, well over three-quarters of the population of Britain still believe in God), when it comes to economics, secular humanism rules the day. People who regard God only as a remote benefactor assume that God is not concerned about such matters. As the mathematician Laplace said to Napoleon, when the latter asked where God fitted into his mechanics: 'Sire, I have no need of that

hypothesis.' So say Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman – whatever their private religious opinions, they have no need for God in their economic hypotheses either.

Amos would have us know that if we did but understand the universe better we would realize that God is the one hypothesis we can never do without. 'When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?' He is not a remote benefactor. On the contrary, he upholds the cosmos; he is the first cause behind all effects. Nothing happens, good or bad, unless he orders the countdown and presses the button. He is no Santa Claus. He is an all-pervading, all-seeing, all-controlling sovereign.

History does not advance by coincidences and accidents, still less in accordance with godless, humanistic theories. History is 'his story'. He directs every chapter of it, and, that being so, it is quite impossible to discuss economics or anything else without reference to him. If you want to make valid economic forecasts, then, do not listen to the stock-market computers. Listen to the Bible.

'Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets' (3:7). It is from taking note of people such as Amos, Jeremiah, Elijah and Moses, then, that we will learn to make society prosper. They were people to whom God gave insight into the way he governs the nations, and if we read them we will find that they are unanimous on one thing. It is righteousness that exalts a nation (Pr. 14:34), not monetarism or socialism, not productivity agreements or incomes policy. Righteousness exalts a nation, for there is no smoke without fire. And there is no sin without judgment.

No sin without judgment

'Proclaim to the fortresses of Ashdod and to the fortresses of Egypt: "Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria; see the great unrest within her and the oppression

among her people." "They do not know how to do right," declares the Lord, "who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses." Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "An enemy will overrun the land; he will pull down your strongholds and plunder your fortresses" ' (3:9–11).

Amos has now got beyond tact and subtlety in his preaching. There will be no more softening-up tactics; instead he is seeking to stun his audience by the insolence of his irony. He issues an invitation to the pagan aristocrats from the enemy countries round about. Israelites were not the only people who built themselves prestigious fortresses. The Philistines had them in Ashdod to the west and the Egyptians had them across the Nile to the south. 'Come on over, you wealthy businessmen, come and watch the show. God is going to make Samaria an example to you all. She has a plutocracy, too, living in fortresses, just like you. See how they were built? Out of plunder and loot, for theirs is a city full of criminal violence and economic exploitation. There is great unrest and oppression among her people. They don't earn their money honestly. They steal it; they extort it. Things have got so bad there that words such as decency and justice have almost lost their meaning.'

'Come on, you Middle Eastern political observers,' Amos continues, 'Come and see that they are not going to get away with it! I want you pagans to watch the humiliation of Samaria. After all, you have some measure of excuse, you have never enjoyed the privilege she had. But Israel ought to know better. She ought to know, if anybody does, that you cannot have a healthy national economy without a healthy national morality. The two are linked; the Lord of history sees to that.'

Israel judged

'Therefore this is what the sovereign Lord says: "An enemy will overrun the land; he will pull down your strongholds and plunder your fortresses" ' (3:11). The future for Israel is there in one terse sentence: the invasion of the land, the siege of the city, the pillage of those arrogant castles. If would be poetic justice, after all. They were built by plunder; what more appropriate fate than that they should be destroyed by plunder?

'This is what the Lord says: "As a shepherd saves from the lion's mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved, those who sit in Samaria on the edge of their beds and on the corner of their couches" ' (3:12). Amos's irony really reaches its zenith here, but you have to understand a little of the background to get the point. If a hired shepherd lost a sheep through the attack of some predator, he was required by law to bring part of the torn carcass of the animal to the owner to prove that he had not stolen it himself. In the same way, says Amos, all that is going to be saved of Samaria will be a few skeletal remains, sufficient to prove to those pagan spectators the totality of her destruction. Yes, he says, those very remains will be a commentary in themselves – things like a leg from one of those elegant beds they spent so much time lying on, or a snippet from one of those silken damask cushions with which they so elegantly decorated their luxury apartments. Those pathetic remnants of their former affluence will be all the evidence anyone needs, both of their sin and their judgment.

' "Hear this and testify against the house of Jacob," declares the Lord, the Lord God Almighty. "On the day I punish Israel for her sins, I will destroy the altars of Bethel; the horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground" ' (3:13–14). In Israelite society the Bethel shrine was regarded as a place of asylum. But Amos says that

when judgment breaks, there will be no such religious asylum for Israel. Bethel's shrine never was legitimate. All she ever did there was to lay on fancy ceremonials. God was as tired of her religious hypocrisy as he was of her social injustice. 'The horns of the altar will be cut off,' he says. The place of sanctuary will be eliminated. This time there will be no second chance, no last-minute reprieve; no opportunity for repentance.

' "I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house; the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished," declares the Lord' (3:15).

This is the last step in Amos's logic. No privilege without responsibility; Israel deserved punishment. No smoke without fire:; Israel had been warned of punishment. No sin without judgment; Israel will receive punishment. He would hit her where it hurts, in the economy. The symbols of her affluence would be razed to the ground. It would be the end of her prosperity.

And what about us?

As we said at the beginning of this chapter, economics has become an obsession of ours. There is no question to which our society is more urgently seeking an answer than how we can sustain our prosperity. Amos has something of immense significance to contribute to that debate. I do not suggest that we ought to despise the advice of the Galbraiths and the Friedmans of this world, but, in so far as they neglect the Bible, their theories of economic growth are lacking the most vital parameter of all: the sovereignty of God. Amos has a message for our national leaders. He tells us to be sure of this: there is no privilege without responsibility, and we in the West are privileged nations.

Of course, as nations, we are not in the same covenantal position as the Jews were, but we have been privileged.

The word of God has shaped our Western cultures. And with that privilege comes responsibility.

The politicians are not in charge of the our economy, nor are those so-called market forces they speak about. It is the sovereign Lord who will dictate our national fortunes, and what matters to him is not party dogma, whether of right or left; what matters to him is righteousness.

'When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?' (3:6). There is no national sin without national judgment. As Jesus said: 'Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness [or justice], and all these things will be given to you as well' (Mt. 3:33). To state the logical converse: ignore the kingdom of God and his righteousness and justice and none of these things will be yours at all. If you want prosperity for your country, then heed the trumpet blast of the prophet.

3

REPEATED WARNINGS
Amos 4:1–13

Any questions?

A radio 'Any Questions?' panel was once asked which of the following had the most influence on British society: the petticoat, the pulpit or the press. It provoked some lively debate, but upon one thing the panelists were totally agreed: of the three, the pulpit was indisputably the least significant. Indeed, it was clear to them that, as far as the social history of the 1980s was concerned, it would make little difference if the church ceased to exist altogether.

That is a conclusion with which I suspect the majority of people in Britain and the West would have to agree, albeit in some cases reluctantly. For, though the potential influence of religion is as great as it ever was, it has to be admitted that, in these secularized days, that potential is largely untapped. The church has either altogether abdicated its role as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, or else it has prostituted it by becoming little more than a passenger on everybody else's bandwaggon. We only have ourselves to blame if radio panelists find it so easy to write off Christianity as, in the words of one contemporary writer, 'privately engaging but socially irrelevant'.

One thing is sure, they would not have found it so easy

to dismiss the prophet Amos. We have seen in our opening chapters that Amos lived in Israel in the eighth century BC. Those times were prosperous and affluent, yet they were times, too, of great moral and social decline in the country.

Unlike so many preachers today, Amos was not content in this situation to stick to the safe ground of privatized piety, offering little homilies about prayer life. Nor would he simply echo the conventional clichés of his cultural environment, and baptize the status quo. He insisted upon challenging the social evils of his day. Economics, politics, law and order – as a prophet of the Lord he felt burdened with a word of direct relevance to all these areas of public life.

In fact, the passage we come to now, in chapter 4, is very close to being an answer to the question about social influence that was put to that 'Any Questions?' team. If Amos had been sitting on the panel, he could scarcely have given a more direct reply. In verses 1 to 3 Amos comments on the power of women in his day. Verses 4 and 5 contain his comment on the influence of the church; while verses 6 to 11 you can regard, I think, as constituting a comment about the power of the daily news.

Amos, however, does not leave it there. He is not content just to evaluate the *quantity* of influence these things exercised in his world; it is the *quality* of their influence that matters to him pre-eminently, and without exception none of this trio was having the kind of good effect on society that God expected. That was Amos's complaint, not that they were just ineffective, but that they made the situation worse. So he concludes his contribution to the 'Any Questions?' discussion in verses 12 to 13 with a solemn prediction about the imminent consequences of neglecting God's repeated warnings.

Taking our cue from the question put to that panel, then, we can perhaps summarize the content of chapter 4

alliteratively: *The petticoat, the pulpit, the press* and finally *the prognosis.*

The petticoat

'Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!" ' (4:1).

In 1558 John Knox published a notorious pamphlet entitled *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women.* It was a vehement attack on the degree of political authority wielded by the female sex in his day. What he would have thought of a woman prime minister one dreads to think, for it was an authority which in Knox's view was repugnant both to Scripture and to nature. It did not ingratiate him particularly with Elizabeth I, who by an unfortunate coincidence succeeded to the throne that very year. She was so put out by it that she had Knox permanently debarred from her realm as an undesirable alien. (He was, after all, Scottish!) I imagine that the ladies of the royal court of Samaria must have reacted similarly to this oracle of Amos, for, if anything, his denunciation of them is even more vitriolic than Knox's diatribe against the matriarchs of Tudor Europe. In verse 1 he calls them 'cows of Bashan'. Is that any way to speak of female members of the Israelite aristocracy?

It must be explained that, in eighth-century-BC Israel, to call a woman a cow was not necessarily vulgar or abusive. It could even be interpreted as a compliment. In the Song of Songs, the lover tells his girlfriend that she has teeth like a flock of freshly shorn sheep, and a neck like the tower of David (Song 4:2, 4). I can't see him getting very far with that line of sweet talk in the back row of the cinema, but obviously it worked like a charm in those days. So, in the poetic conventions of that day, likening these ladies to cattle was not likely in itself to be regarded

as abusive. Cows of Bashan were in fact renowned for their quality. If he had said it in the right tone of voice and followed it up with a few more flattering remarks, Amos would perhaps have had the fashionable women of Samaria eating out of his hand. But there can be little doubt that, for Amos, this bovine metaphor, even if it could be superficially beguiling, was heavy with sarcasm.

'Yes, cows of Bashan! That is all you noble ladies really are: pampered pets. You live only to indulge your appetite, like cows in the pasture, to eat and to sleep. There is no spiritual dimension to your existence. Like brute beasts, the only things of interest to you is what is in the feeding trough. Your luxurious lifestyle is all you care about and you don't much care how you procure that lifestyle.'

Just a few strokes of the pen are all that Amos needs to paint a vivid picture of the kind of women he is talking about. They oppress the poor. Haughty and arrogant, they use their class as a weapon to keep the less privileged in their proper place. They crush the needy. They are cruel and pitiless, and the economically disadvantaged get no crumbs from their tables. They say to their husbands, 'Bring us some drinks!' Contemptuous and debauched as they were, it is obvious who wore the trousers in their homes, and it does not take much imagination to visualize the number of empty gin bottles in the dustbin each week. What a charming picture of femininity they must have made, these boozy Jezebels. That was petticoat power in the eighth century BC. Nor was Amos alone in the disgust he felt for it.

'The Sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness: "The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fish-hooks. You will each go straight out through breaks in the wall, and you will be cast out towards Harmon," declares the Lord' (4:2–3). It must take something outrageous to provoke God to an oath, but so appalled was he by these women, that that

was his response. In no way was he going to let them get away with such conduct indefinitely.

They behaved like cows, so they would be treated like cows, and butchered. That is what he says. Their carefully fattened carcasses would be dragged outside the breached walls of their luxurious homes like so much offal, unfit for human consumption. It is very brutal language. Yet clearly, as far as God was concerned, these particular ladies of Samaria constituted an outrage of extraordinary proportion.

Isn't that a very solemn thought for us today? These verses, it seems to me, have a powerful relevance to every woman in our contemporary society, in that they reveal the dramatic influence that women can have on society and the responsibility that goes with that influence.

Though no Amos, Dr Johnson wrote in the eighteenth century: 'Nature has given women so much power that the law has very wisely given them little.' It is easy to dismiss his wit as typical male chauvinism, and, in quoting him, I certainly do not want to be interpreted as supporting any kind of institutionalized sexual discrimination or to suggest that women should have no political power. Women have exactly the same human rights as men, and nowhere does the Bible suggest to the contrary. But I do have a certain unease at feminist campaigning for legislation on equal opportunity. This is not because I disagree with the legitimacy of those demands, but simply because they make me wonder if women today are not woefully unaware of the huge power they wield already, and have always wielded, even in the most grotesquely male-dominated society.

It would be a tragic mistake to think that these women of which Amos speaks so severely were the eighth-century-BC equivalent of present-day feminists. They were not particularly politicized or emancipated women. Israel had always been a patriarchal society, and it is most unlikely,

therefore, that these women exercised any kind of direct political power. They were not cabinet ministers; they were not in charge of the army; they did not control the wheels of industry or sit on the benches of the High Court. In Israel those jobs were all male preserves. As far as power was concerned, the most these women could hope for in a direct sense was perhaps the management of a domestic household and their own business enterprise in the shadow of their husband's public reputation. Further, these were not career women, any more than the cows of Bashan were working oxen. No, these were wealthy, urban housewives, snobbishly upper-class and decidedly too fond of the sherry, but in their own eyes, pillars of respectable society.

So why is Amos so hostile towards such women? It is not as if they were responsible for the moral and social disintegration in the country. After all, they were 'only women'! Yet it is clear that in God's eyes femininity was no more valid as an excuse for them than it had been for Eve. As far as he was concerned, the social injustice that was so rife in Israel was in many respects their doing, because as Dr Johnson observed, Nature has given women power: no direct political authority perhaps, but power, nevertheless.

They have power within marriage, for a start. Such is the structure of the male ego and male sexuality that it is extremely difficult for any husband to resist his wife's influence. That is why it is often said that behind any great man there is always a woman of equal quality.

Secondly, they have power in the market place, for in almost every society on earth, it is the women who are the principal consumers. They decide how money is spent. In a very real sense they control the economy. Ask the advertisers.

And thirdly, they have power in the nursery, for, while the care of young children can no doubt be undertaken by either parent, no-one can dispute the very special bond

which exists between a mother and baby, and the social influences that bond transmits. 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.'

I certainly do not mean that legislation against sex discrimination is a bad idea, but that women do not need laws to make them powerful. Their social influence is vast, even when their political or legal position may be appalling, and it is because of this that God also holds these particular women of Israel at least partially responsible for the decay in their society. It was *their* greed, *their* self-indulgence, *their* materialistic attitude that was being transmitted through their neglected children, through their luxurious homes, through their hen-pecked husbands, out into society at large.

If it was true then, it can be true now, and, I suggest, is more than a little true today. Women have always held the awesome responsibility of being the final guardians of moral values. God holds them responsible for the use they make of the vast influence with which their sex endows them.

Petticoat power is real, and because it is real, it will be judged.

The pulpit

' "Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. Burn leavened bread as a thank-offering and brag about your freewill offerings – boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do," declares the sovereign Lord' (4:4–5).

We saw in the previous chapter how Amos worked hard at capturing the ears of his often hostile audience, how he loved to begin his sermons in a way which sounded as if they were going to be acceptable and conventional and then suddenly turn the tables on his hearers and trap them

into listening to something they would have preferred to have ignored. In these verses we have another example of this clever rhetorical device.

There is something lyrical about these verses; almost certainly, Amos is singing or chanting as he delivers them. One suggestion is that he is mimicking a priest's liturgical invocation – something like that high-pitched call to worship in Moslem countries. Alternatively, he may be evoking a choral introit such as the temple singers might render at the beginning of a service. Whatever the precise vibrations these words would have brought to his original hearers, it is some kind of *Venite* – a summons to church.

'Come to Bethel. Come to Gilgal. Bring your sacrifices, bring your tithes,' chants with which no doubt the Israelites were thoroughly familiar. But on Amos's lips they become a satirical lampoon. 'Go to Bethel *and sin*; go to Gilgal *and sin yet more*!' It must have sounded irreverent, almost blasphemous, to take sacred words and music and parody them like that. Yet in Israel a parody of a liturgy was all they deserved, for their whole religion had become a caricature of true spirituality.

It was hypocritical religion

Have you heard of the misprint on the notice outside a church, advertising the next Sunday's evening service? 'The sinning will be led by Rev. X.' But it wasn't a misprint as far as Israel was concerned. They came to church on Sunday to pray on their knees and then went away to prey on their neighbours the rest of the week. It was hypocritical.

It was unbiblical religion

I love the story of the Catholic and the Protestant who were arguing with each other about whose form of worship was right. The Catholic is supposed to have ended the conversation, 'You go on worshipping God in your way,

and I'll go on worshipping him in his.'

It is important to worship God in *his* way, but the Israelites weren't concerned about that. 'Burn leavened bread as a thank offering,' chants Amos. That was specifically forbidden in the law of Moses, but this made no difference to Bethel. They had been devising new religious ideas ever since Israel had broken away from Judah 200 years before. The shrine at Bethel itself was the illegitimate brainchild of Jeroboam I. Innovation was the name of the game in Bethel worship.

But it was not only hypocritical and unbiblical.

It was ritualistic religion

A radio announcer once introduced a morning service by saying, 'Good morning, listeners, today's worship is a repeat of last Sunday's broadcast.' That is all the worship at Bethel ever was: a repeat of last Sunday's broadcast, punctilious repetition of hackneyed rites, sacrifices every morning, tithes every three years (literally 'every three days'; is Amos sarcastically exaggerating or telling us exactly what they did?). It is clear that their religion was just a meaningless round of pious theatrical.

Why did they do it? What could possibly motivate people to take so much trouble over empty formalities? Amos tells us that it was conceit: 'Boast about it, brag about it,' he says. They wanted to be known as religious people. Smug self-satisfaction oozed from them. 'This is what you love to do,' he says (4:5). They enjoyed it all; it was great fun. There was no thought of God in the whole exercise. Israelite worship was an ego trip pure and simple, self-pleasing, self-congratulatory.

It was not that the pulpit had lost its influence in Israel. Churchgoing had never been more popular, but, as far as changing society for the better was concerned, Bethel was no use at all. If anything, she only made matters worse by condoning the moral decay and encouraging people to feel

spiritually secure in the midst of it. God's final verdict on this cult of religious complacency has already been given: 'I will destroy the altars of Bethel; the horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground' (3:14).

Evangelical hypocrisy

Don't these words challenge us immensely today? Why do we go to church? Because our friends will notice if we aren't there and start asking awkward questions? Or because we have always done it. Its a sort of habit and we feel guilty if we don't go?

There was a time when I thought everybody who carried a Bible under his or her arm must be a real Christian. I was young and idealistic in those days, but I have learnt better since. There is no religious hypocrisy more deceptive and there is no religious formality more empty than evangelical hypocrisy and evangelical formality.

Haven't you met the kind of evangelical I mean? He surrounds himself with housegroups and prayer meetings. He is for ever attending this convention or that conference, this revival rally or that renewal meeting. He fills his house with missionary magazines and Christian newspapers, gives large cheques to the church treasurer and makes profound and spiritual comments at the church Bible study. Yet when you look into his life you find it is all a sham, born of conceit and self-satisfaction. For all his sanctimoniousness and religious activity, his personal morality brings shame on the Master whose disciple he claims to be. Amos would say of him as he said of Israel, 'Go to church and sin!'

The world would be better off without such religion. For all the positive influence that he can have on a sick society, such a person might just as well go and sit in the betting shop or in the pornographic cinema as sit in a pew.

The press

' "I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me," declares the Lord' (4:6).

There are two things that give the news media their extraordinary power. The first is the ability to select the news and the second is the ability to interpret it. They decide what current events shall receive public attention and how those events should be understood. As a result, they do not just reflect society's values, they mould them. It was the same in the case of Israel's less technological 'communications systems'.

Look at the list of catastrophes Amos has compiled here from the recent history of his people: famine (verse 6); drought (verses 7 and 8); crop diseases (verse 9); epidemics and war (verse 10); earthquake (verse 11). Their whole history had been a history of close shaves. 'You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire' (4:11).

One would have thought that such a catalogue of disaster would have been considered newsworthy in any country, but in Israel it seems they paid comparatively little attention to such happenings. Like the readers of today's popular newspapers, the general public was interested in more entertaining events: the next disco at Bethel, maybe, or the latest high-society scandal among those rich ladies of Samaria.

Even more important than the lack of prominence given to these events on the Israelite grapevine, however, was the way they were interpreted when they were reported.

How did the people react to these events when they did hear about them, no doubt on the back page in the small print? Every time it was the same: ' "Yet you have not returned to me," declares the Lord' (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11).

As far as Amos was concerned, these calamities were warnings sent by God to instil a sense of prayerful depen-

dence in these people, to shake them out of their moral complacency to rediscover the real spiritual priorities that they should have had. Yet the newspapers of ancient Israel had not interpreted them in that way at all. No, these things were just unfortunate accidents, regrettable setbacks, bad luck. As far as they were concerned, Israel could not possibly be in God's bad books: just look at how busy Bethel was! The complacency of the nation rendered it totally deaf to the voice of God in these harrowing experiences.

'I say Amos, divine retribution – isn't that, well, old fashioned? They might have thought in those terms centuries ago, but we are more advanced now. We don't believe any of that superstitious mumbo-jumbo.' So, no doubt, the sophisticated citizens of Samaria dismissed those who saw premonitions of doom in famines and earthquakes; and so, no doubt, newspaper editors today would cut any journalistic Amos who sought to interpret contemporary events within a similar context of divine providence.

Could it not be, though, that as God looks down at our world today, just as he looked at Israel two and a half millennia ago, amidst the misery and the war and the want that he sees, his heart is crying. 'I gave you these things, yet you did not return to me'?

Repeated warnings

Here is a vital lesson about how we respond to the daily news. We are very good at rationalizing disaster. Today, of course, the explanation will be scientific. 'Drought – all due to deforestation, isn't it? Floods – the meteorologists understand all that, of course. Earthquakes and volcanoes – geological faults or something, aren't they? Epidemics – caused by viruses, aren't they?' Like Pharoah in the prelude to God's delivery of the enslaved Israelites from Egypt, we see the plagues, but we are convinced that our magicians can handle the situation (*cf.*, *e.g.*, Ex. 7:22). Amos warns

us to beware the technological arrogance that blinds us to the spiritual dimensions of so-called 'natural phenomena'. Looked at from the perspective of secular man, science has done a great deal to remove the threat of all these things. We build reservoirs now to avoid droughts. We spray our crops with fungicide and our deserts with insecticide to stop the mildew and locusts. We inoculate ourselves against plagues; and as for war – there is always the nuclear deterrent! Yet our world today is on to the brink of catastrophes a thousand times more devastating than anything that ever affected Israel. For our problem is that the world is under judgment. It is not lack of technology that hinders the arrival of Utopia, it is God's wrath against human sin. And that message of judgment is just as relevant in the twentieth century AD as it was in the eighth century BC.

Yet even Christians become disturbed when one talks this way. They do not like the idea that disasters come from God. 'How can we believe in a good and loving God when there is so much suffering going on?' Indeed, it is not unusual for people to try and find theological ways of avoiding the embarrassment of attributing such things to God. 'Blame it all on the devil. He is the one who causes all the evil.' Or 'It is the *permissive* will of God. He is just a passive observer of disasters. He allows them but he doesn't actually decree them.'

To all such theories Amos says, 'No! They are as unnecessary as they are fallacious.' Notice the first-person singular in every news story in this chapter: '*I* gave . . . *I* withheld . . . *I* sent . . . *I* struck . . . *I* killed . . . *I* overthrew . . .' (verses 6, 7, 9, 10, 11). The God of the Bible is the sovereign ruler of the universe. He works all things according to the counsel of his own will. For that reason, hard though it may be to accept sometimes, we must not shirk the truth: God says '*I* did it.' Remember Amos's blunt rhetorical question in the previous chapter: 'When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?' (3:6).

'Oh!' people object. 'This is fatalism! We don't believe in a cruel, arbitrary deity who treats us like dispensable pawns on his cosmic chessboard.' It is not so. The biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God over natural phenomena is not at all the same as fatalism, for two reasons.

First, God has a *loving* purpose behind all he does, even the nasty things. 'Yet you have not returned *to me*,' he says. Those are not the words of an arbitrary tyrant. Those are the words of a heartbroken father.

Secondly, this is not fatalism, because God has left room in his universe for a voluntary human response. Indeed, says Amos, the very goal of this sovereign rule is to solicit such a voluntary response. 'Yet *you have not returned* to me' is not the decree of an inexorable fate but the appeal of a frustrated and thwarted lover, a God who gives people freedom of choice and agonizes to see them use it so badly.

When we read of disasters in our newspapers we are not to dismiss them as unfortunate accidents, nor are we to complain of them as cruel acts of fate. Amos teaches here that we are to see in them the rebuking hand of God. Every newspaper headline is a call to repentance for those who have eyes to read it there.

It is not just Amos who tells us that. Jesus does so, too. He picked up a newspaper in his day and there were two stories on the front page: 'PILATE SQUASHES COUP ATTEMPT' and 'SILOAM TOWER-BLOCK COLLAPSE KILLS 18' (Lk. 13:1–5). Jesus' comment was, in effect, 'Do you think the people who perished in those disasters were worse sinners than anyone else in Israel? No,' he says, 'but unless you repent, you too will all perish.' That was the conclusion he drew from the newspapers of his day, and his words are worth pondering.

Jesus is telling us not to individualize retribution. We are not to say that it was because X was particularly unfortunate that he was the victim of that disaster. Nor are we to say that he must have been a particularly bad person;

that is the mistake of an awful lot of primitive religion. It is not true. There is such a thing as innocent suffering: the sufferings of Job and the sufferings of Christ are classic examples. It is mischievous and cruel not to recognize the fact that there is such innocent suffering in our world.

But that does not mean that there is *no* element of retribution in God's providential ordering of events on the cosmic scale. Both Amos and Jesus agree that every disaster in this fallen world is a warning to us. 'Unless you repent,' it says to us, 'you too will all perish.' We should see those words written in banner headlines across every page of every newspaper we read. That ought to be the true power of the press. Unfortunately, it is a power which is no more evident in twentieth-century-AD Britain than it was in eighth-century-BC Israel.

So we have the petticoat, the pulpit and the press. They all have their huge influence, but instead of being used to draw society back to God-centredness it was being used merely to confirm people in their hedonism, self-indulgence and injustice. So Amos draws his conclusion.

The prognosis

'Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel" (4:12). How we human beings try to run away from disturbing realities. We are always doing it. We ignore the toothache until we have to have the tooth pulled. We overspend until we are bankrupt. We know trouble is coming, but we ignore the warnings. That is exactly what was happening to Israel. It was not as if God had not been patient with her. It was not as if he had not tried to correct her, but like a blind man tottering towards a cliff, she kept on pursuing her reckless course of moral decadence. It had to catch up with her eventually, and Amos is telling us here that it had.

'Prepare to meet your God.' Of course we are all familiar

with that phrase. It is the classic text that goes on the back of sandwich-board evangelists, usually in red capitals, with 'The end of the world is nigh' on the other side. Yet that mental association can actually blind us to an important ambiguity. The word 'meet' in Hebrew is neutral. It can mean 'meet' as enemies on the field of battle, but it can also mean 'meet' as allies around a meal of friendship. Sometimes the very ambiguity of the words adds drama to the situation, as in the incident in the Old Testament when Esau was coming to 'meet' his brother Jacob (Gn. 32:6). There had always been a grudge between them and no-one was quite sure what would happen when they were reunited. The messengers told Jacob that Esau was 'coming to meet' him. Jacob was not quite sure what that 'meet' meant, so he hurriedly decided to divide his family in case it was a hostile rather than a friendly meeting (Gn. 32:7). He prepared to meet his brother, fully recognizing the ambiguity of that word.

So Amos is advising the Israelites here, 'Prepare to meet your God. The days of warning are over. God himself is coming to sort out this matter. Will he come as a friend or as an enemy? In the state you are in at the moment, the prognosis is not good. Prepare to meet your God!'

That surely is the practical challenge that we must think about too.

4

AN OFFER OF MERCY
Amos 5:1–17

Background music

Have you noticed how much the cinema depends on background music to make its point? Take a western, for instance. A cowboy strolls into the saloon. He looks indistinguishable from the others gathered at the bar; but at that point the music changes, becoming louder, more insistent. Immediately you know he is the villain: he has some evil intent. Or perhaps you are watching a thriller. The camera scans the living-room, tables, chairs, desks, carpets. Everything looks perfectly innocent; but listen to the suspense-laden music! It warns the squeamish amongst us to shut our eyes because at any moment we are going to be shown a murdered corpse or some similar scene of horror. What would the big-screen romance be without the inevitable strings accompaniment? What would the war film be without the Dambusters' March or its equivalent? Over the years, film-makers have developed a whole vocabulary of musical convention by which atmospheres can be set and expectations raised in the audience without a word having been spoken.

Indeed sometimes the directors' choice of incidental music can be a stroke of genius in its own right. In his science-fiction classic *2001 – a Space Odyssey* Stanley

Kubrik made his rockets glide through space, not to the kind of electronic composition we have come to associate with futuristic special effects, but rather to the waltzes of Johann Strauss. The very unexpectedness of that choice of music added an artistic dimension to the film. For the first time we saw spaceships, not as sinister missiles, but as graceful dancers.

One of the most powerful exploitations of this blend of music and film that I can remember is a film that was shown on television some years ago around the time of Armistice Day on the subject of war. It was a short film but I found it very moving. The director had edited together short clips of newsreel from the first and second world wars. The trenches on the Somme; a child weeping by the dead body of its mother; a row of wooden crosses in a military cemetery; the devastation of great architecture in the blitz and of course the gruesome aftermath of Hiroshima; scenes like that, one after another in quick succession, were flashed before our eyes. But instead of attempting to dub on the obvious kind of soundtrack – guns firing, air-raid sirens and the like – the film-maker chose as background a solitary choirboy singing a hymn. The emotional clash between the religious sentiment of the music and the snapshots of horror that he was showing on the screen added enormously to the intensity of the film's impact. You came away feeling that the man who had made that film was angry about war, and his anger was all the more eloquent because he had not explicitly stated it.

I mention that film because it came into my mind as I looked deeply into the passage that we come to now. You only have to read through Amos 5: 1–17 to appreciate that it really is a thoroughly disjointed and muddled passage. There seems to be no unifying theme running through it. Indeed, critical scholars are almost unanimous in their opinion that the text has suffered dislocations and additions and needs their scissors and paste to reconstruct it.

As I looked at it more closely, however, I began to realize that any arbitrary rearrangement of the chapter, convenient as it might be for the preacher who likes his material nicely organized, may miss the genius of Amos' composition altogether. We have said previously that Amos's audience was at best indifferent and at worst probably hostile to him, so that his first task whenever he opened his mouth had been to capture the ears of a reluctant congregation. We have seen him use every kind of rhetorical device to do that, and this chapter is, I believe, one more example of that.

The textual critics are right to identify a number of confused strands within this passage, but where I think they are wrong is in assuming that the confusion is accidental. I am quite sure it is not. Amos is simply doing what that film-director did. He is editing together short snippets from different sources and welding them into a dramatic unity by a clever choice of background music. Of course, as we read the book in translation, that music is not very obvious. But it is there. Look at 5:8–9, for example. They present a classic example of the muddle; even the translators felt obliged to put it in parenthesis because it looks so out of place.

Yet there are good reasons, based on the literary style of those two verses, to believe that they are lines from a hymn. In fact, if we read the last verse of the previous chapter, 4:13, we find what may well be an earlier stanza from the same Hebrew psalm.

Perhaps we are to imagine Amos suddenly breaking out into song midway through his sermon. I knew a Pentecostal pastor who was fond of doing that, and it certainly grabbed people's attention. Or, more likely, the whole oracle is being delivered within earshot of the temple choir at Bethel. Perhaps the strains of their singing are every now and again wafted across to Amos, and he stops his preaching and joins in a few bars, loaded no doubt with

heavy irony, bearing in mind the contempt he felt for the cult of Bethel. Either way, Amos is providing a musical accompaniment to his preaching.

Neither is he content to insert an intermezzo; he adds an overture too. Look at 5:1–3. These verses are cast in a very distinctive classic style of Hebrew poetry, a dirge, or, as it is called in verse 1, a lament. This was the kind of music that was invariably played at Hebrew funerals in order to enhance the mourning. The incongruity of a piece like that cannot have failed to capture people's attention. If you want a modern-day parallel, imagine listening to a sermon while some distant trumpeter plays the Last Post, or some hidden piano beats out the mournful chords of Chopin's Funeral March.

It is against this musical background that Amos has thrown snatches of his sermons – two sermons, in fact. There is one in verses 7 and 10–13. These are snatches of a sermon on judgment in which Amos indicts Israel for her sin and predicts the punishment which she is going to incur. The other sermon is in verses 4–6 and 14–15. We would probably call this an evangelistic sermon. Amos is appealing to the nation to turn to God and find pardon before it is too late.

We have, then, four intermingling elements in this passage; the musical score comprising a hymn and a lament, and the screenplay, comprising a word of judgment and an offer of mercy. Looked at unsympathetically it does seem muddled and incoherent, but if we think of it as rather like that film I mentioned, a kind of collage in which clips of material are being flashed before our eyes in close succession to the haunting accompaniment of some carefully selected melody, then we may begin to capture something of the dramatic impact Amos was making on his original audience.

When we read the Old Testament, it is not scissors and paste that we need in order to make sense of the text, but

simply a greater sensitivity to the literary style and the life situation of the author. The original effect of this chapter could perhaps be excitingly recreated with the help of drama, visual aids, and a twin-screen slide projection. But as we are bound by the medium of print, we must content ourselves by separating the four elements and looking at them one by one thus imposing order on Amos's intentional disorder. I regret having to do that because inevitably we are going to lose some of the impact. Remember, as we look at these four elements, that, as Amos' original hearers experienced them, they were not neatly separated out, but a jarring medley of contrasting sounds and images, bombarding their eyes and ears.

Amos is not a lecturer, coolly trying to inform our minds; he never is. He is a prophet and he is passionately concerned to touch our hearts. If our hearts are not responsive to his words, then, however successful we are at disentangling his sources, we have still missed his point.

The sovereign power of God

'He who made the Pleiades and Orion, who turns blackness into dawn and darkens day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land – the Lord is his name' (5:8).

Israel's basic spiritual problem was complacency. Everything was going wonderfully. The economy was booming, at least as far as the urban aristocracy was concerned. Their future seemed assured, and when people are enjoying that kind of affluence they do not really feel much need of God. Things seem perfectly stable without him. By quoting this hymn and echoing its music in their ears, Amos is trying to convey the precariousness of that apparent stability on which they were relying. He does it by reminding them that for all its regularity, the universe itself is a potentially very unstable system.

Think of the stars, for instance; constellations such as the Pleiades and Orion. The most amateur astronomer cannot miss them when he looks up at the night sky. They never change. They are always there; constantly rotating with the seasons, the very epitome of stability. But, says Amos, God made them. Those constellations are not eternal. They had a beginning, and when God so wishes, they will have an ending too.

Or think of the sun, that vast reservoir of stellar energy upon which our little planet relies totally. Every morning it is there in the sky without fail, working its twenty-four-hour shift, as regular as clockwork. It has done so for as long as man can remember. But it is God who orders that solar cycle. He 'turns blackness into dawn and darkens day into night'. It does not happen automatically. As G. K. Chesterton observed once, the sun does not rise by some intrinsic inevitibility. The sun rises because every day God says, 'Get up and do it again.' And whenever he likes, he can tell it to stop.

Or think of the tides, mighty movements of the oceans drawn this way and that by the influence of the moon. Spring-tide and neap-tide, every day they keep the rules, following what the almanac says, so reassuringly predictable. But, says Amos, it is God who summons those waters and pours them out over the dry land. The predictability of their motion just reflects the regularity of his command. He has only to utter a word for the pattern to change and the deluge to return. The world is stable only because God is stable.

Nature has no intrinsic immutability. What we call the uniformity of nature is simply the consistency of God's providential ordering of his world. There is such a thing as natural law only because there is such a thing as a natural lawgiver.

In the eighteenth century there used to be a school of thought called deism. Deists were so entranced with science

that they thought of God as a kind of remote celestial mechanic. He set the universe going, wound it up like clockwork, and then, except for an occasional drip of miraculous oil, didn't interfere any more. They held the view that the universe 'runs on its own'. But that is not a biblical way of looking at the world. A much better analogy is a television tube. In a television tube, the picture seems to be moving on its own on the surface of the screen, but in fact it is perpetually projected on to that surface by the electron gun at the back. So the universe, which we so glibly assume runs under its own steam, is constantly projected into existence by God's unseen command. He did not just make the world and retire. He upholds the universe, 'sustaining all things by his powerful word' (Heb. 1:3). As Paul too insists, 'in [Christ] all things hold together' (Col. 1:17).

There is nothing inviolable, then, about the status quo. The world is controlled not by impersonal laws, but by a personal God. 'The Lord is his name,' says Amos, 'and that being so, how on earth can you Israelites be so complacent about the political and economic situation?'

'He flashes destruction on the stronghold and brings the fortified city to ruin' (5:9). If, as I suggested earlier, this hymn was familiar to the audience that Amos was confronting, then I suspect that this last couplet may be an addition of his own composition, an ironic sting in the tail such as he loves. 'If Yahweh is the Lord of nature, as you sing, do you not realize that he is also the Lord of history? If he controls the rise and fall of tides, do you not realize that he also controls the rise and fall of nations?'

I think it was Senator Goldwater who once said, 'A government which is big enough to give you all you want, is also big enough to take it all away again.' That is true of God too. A God who is powerful enough to tame the random energies of primeval chaos and make an ordered universe for us to live in safely must be powerful enough

to unleash those same energies upon those who arrogantly defy him. There is nothing necessarily stable about anything. As we have already noted, in a world littered with the wrecks of civilizations and empires there is nothing particularly immortal about ours.

The solemn decree of God

We turn our attention now to that other musical background that Amos is chanting.

'Hear this word, O house of Israel, this lament I take up concerning you: "Fallen is Virgin Israel, never to rise again, deserted in her own land, with no-one to lift her up" ' (5:1–2).

A newspaper once accidently published Mark Twain's obituary. When Mark Twain read about it, he was so amused he sent a cable to the editor. It read: 'The report of my death was an exaggeration.' I cannot help feeling that those who heard this lament by Amos would not have responded in quite so lighthearted a fashion. He is writing an obituary too, an obituary for the entire nation, and it was no journalistic slip-up. Notice the past tenses: 'fallen', 'deserted'. He has quite intentionally taken the perspective of one for whom national disaster is not a gloomy prospect, but a ghastly memory. It is a tragic situation that he describes. 'Fallen is Virgin Israel,' that word 'virgin' emphasizing that it was a premature death; she had never fulfilled her early promise.

It was a desperate situation too; 'deserted in her own land, with no-one to lift her up.' She lacked both the internal resources and the external aid that might have assisted; no hope was left for her. And it was a terminal condition: she was 'never to rise again'.

More than that, it was a humiliating situation, too. 'The city that marches out a thousand strong for Israel will have

only a hundred left; the town that marches out a hundred strong will have only ten left' (5:3). That is a savage description of an army cut to ribbons. Just think what a catastrophe it would be if a modern task force that had been sent out returned with only 10% survivors. Such a devastation, says Amos, would be the fate of the whole land; every battalion reduced to a company, every company reduced to a platoon. The military pride of Israel would be utterly broken by a rout so terrible it would decimate the population. If anything deserved a requiem lament to be written, this did. Amos is predicting a funeral, the funeral of the nation.

'There will be wailing in all the streets and cries of anguish in every public square. The farmers will be summoned to weep and the mourners to wail. There will be wailing in all the vineyards' (5:16).

Urban and rural areas together will all be reduced to tears. But perhaps the most disturbing feature of all is that this tragic, desperate, humiliating, agonizing situation will be God's doing.

' ". . . for I will pass through your midst," says the Lord' (5:17).

So it was God who was driving the nails into Israel's coffin. It was God who was tolling her death knell. It was God who was writing her epitaph. This God of sovereign power that Israel sang about in her hymns had issued a solemn decree: 'I will pass through your midst.' So there will be no more postponement, no more probation, no more amnesties. The time of stability is over. God is going to settle accounts with Israel and it will be no laughing matter when he does. On the contrary, it will be a funeral for the nation. 'Fallen is Virgin Israel, never to rise again.'

Here is something that we must all clearly understand: the God of the Bible is not soft. Paul speaks of the kindness and the *sternness* of God (Rom. 11:22). Jesus himself warns us not to be afraid of those who kill the body, but rather

to be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Mt. 10:28).

It is the fashion in our modern, liberal environment to play down the harder side of God's personality and to talk only about his love. But, for any rigorous thinker, all that does is to create more problems than it solves. In particular it creates the so-called problem of suffering. 'How can you believe in a God who is all love when the world is full of such misery?' the sceptic asks, and the question is valid. You can't believe in such a God. The Bible never says you should. Suffering was not a problem for Amos. What mystified Amos was that the world had survived as long as it had and that God was as patient as he was. For Amos's God was not all love. Love was a true but not an exhaustive description of God's character as far as Amos was concerned. There is something more to God, and it is because of that 'something more' that the prophets who knew him best were moved to write funeral laments for the nation.

What that 'something more' is Amos tells us in a single word – *righteousness*. It brings us to that third element in this passage.

The moral concern of God

'You who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground . . .' (5:7). Thomas Jefferson, the great architect of the American Constitution, wrote a line in his *Notes on Virginia* which I have always felt to be more fundamentally Christian than anything else he wrote: 'I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.' I wonder if there is anybody in our modern Western governments who can honestly echo that sentiment.

There was certainly no-one of such a mind in Israel. The justice of God was something that never crossed their minds. 'Indeed,' says Amos, 'what you call justice is such

a revolting perversion of the word that it makes God sick. You turn justice into bitterness' – literally, 'poison'.

Amos is not content to express that accusation in abstract generalizations. '. . . You hate the one who reproves in court and despise him who tells the truth' (5:10). There are two ways of understanding what Amos is saying there. At the very least he is saying that in the Israel of his day the proper process of law was being held in contempt. A judge who passed a fair sentence or a witness who gave honest evidence was not admired for his integrity or courage, but was scorned and discriminated against. Possibly, however, Amos is saying something a little stronger than that. I think he is affirming that the whole judicial system in Israel at this time was being subverted from the top.

The word 'court' perhaps puts us in mind of our own courtrooms, but nothing quite so formal is intended here. The Hebrew word is 'gate'. In ancient Israel, the traditional way to get a legal dispute settled was to go to the elders who sat by the main entrance to the city, the gate, and present one's case to them. There were clear principles laid down in the constitution which Moses had written directing local judges how they were to exercise their authority in this respect.

Deuteronomy 16:18–20 is an example. That passage emphasizes that justice and fairness were to be the informing principles for the judiciary. Elsewhere Moses specified certain provisions to ensure the maintenance of that justice and righteousness; in particular, strict rules of evidence, and the prohibition of bribery and of any kind of partiality on grounds of wealth or poverty (see, *e.g.*, Dt. 17:6; 19:15; Ex. 28:8; Lv. 19:15).

It seems very likely, judging by what we know of Israel in the eighth century, both from looking at Amos as a whole, and from archaeological excavations, that this highly devolved system of local courts administered by the

city elders within a framework of constitutional rights was being grossly undermined in Amos's day by the power of a centralized aristocracy who had their own ideas about judicial administration. Amos gives us a typical example of their brand of justice. 'You trample on the poor and force him to give you corn' (5:11). Or, to follow an alternative reading, which I think may be better: 'You impose heavy rents on the poor and you take taxes of grain from them.'

The words 'rent' and 'tax' are important. This is not simple robbery. There is a pretence of legality about what was going on in Israel at this time. The money these people were demanding was 'rent'. The grain they were levying was a 'tax'. These exploitative barons and mandarins had manipulated the system to their own advantage and institutionalized their extortionate practices. 'The law is on our side,' they would tell their poor serfs. 'Pay up, or we'll take you to court.' The poor got no sympathetic hearing at their 'gate'. This new urban elite had their own law-enforcement techniques, and fair trials and honest judges did not come into it. Hence 'you oppress the righteous and take bribes' (5:12). There was an element of coercion and of corruption.

There was an element of intimidation, too. 'Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil' (5:13). 'If you know what is good for you, mind your own business and keep your mouth shut.'

And the upshot of it all? 'You deprive the poor of justice in the courts' (literally 'gates') (5:12). They do not get 'gate' justice any more; the whole system has been subverted. The old judicial way, if it functioned at all, was just an empty farce, because the centre of power had moved away from the elders in the gate to those wealthy land-owners in their big palaces. The Israelite constitution with its commitment to equality and liberty under one law had been abandoned. That is why Amos says that righteousness has been cast to the ground (5:7).

All this has great relevance to a question which is often raised today about what is called *structural evil.* Sometimes we hear people say that communism is evil or that capitalism is evil. I am never completely happy with that sort of statement, because morality is essentially a personal characteristic. I do not think that good and evil can, strictly speaking, be predicated of impersonal systems. But that observation must not seduce us into adopting the kind of privatized morality which is concerned about standards of personal honesty but is indifferent to issues of social justice.

Amos is clear that God is interested in structures and systems and how they work. The law of Moses laid down judicial institutions as well as moral principles. It is not that institutions in themselves are good or evil, but they have a very important effect on fostering good or evil. If a nation abandons constitutional law and gives monopoly power to a social elite, injustice is not *bound* to occur, but, given the corruptibility of human nature, there is a strong likelihood that it will. The dangers of communism and capitalism lie precisely in their propensity to concentrate power in the hands of a few, rather than, in the words of Amos, to establish justice in the gate.

There is nothing new about this, of course. One has only to read a little Marx to see how the ruling class has exploited the poor again and again throughout history. The difference is that Marx regarded it as historically inevitable and saw the outcome as social revolution. Amos, on the other hand, regarded it as morally indefensible and saw the outcome as divine judgment. 'You trample on the poor and force him to give you corn. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine' (5:11).

There is a futility about the luxury and the wealth that these landlords have built on their exploitation, says Amos.

It is going to be short-lived. They would scarcely have opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their investments. They may subvert the justice of the lawcourts but they could never subvert the justice of heaven, for God is not to be cajoled into lenience. He is righteous. He burns with moral concern.

As far as God was concerned these crimes against the poor were 'sins'. 'I know how many are your offences and how great your sins' (5:12). In the corrupt courts of Jeroboam's Israel they may have been technically legal, but, judged by the rightousness of God, they had not the slightest pretext of being moral. And it was by moral, rather than by legal, criteria that God would judge the world.

That is why I say that Jefferson spoke well when he said, 'I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.' It makes the last element of Amos's medley all-important.

The merciful invitation of God

'This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: "Seek me and live" ' (5:4).

Amos is telling us how to find the mercy of God. This priceless commodity ought to be of interest to each one of us for our nation's sake. For if God stepped in to judge the nation of Israel because of the moral decay in her, why should he spare us? To quote a line from Shaw, 'Do you think the laws of God will be suspended in favour of England because you were born in it?' A concern for one's country and for our grandchildren ought to move us to be interested in what Amos says to an Israel under judgment: 'Seek me and live.'

But these words also have an immense and direct relevance to us individually, because, since the coming of Jesus, we know that it is not just the fate of nations which

is held in the balances of God's judgment, but also that of our souls. Whatever happens to our nation in the future, whether she prospers or perishes, every one of us must face God on his own. We must each give account of the use we have made of our moral freedom. If we are concerned for our eternal destiny, Amos's advice is vital for us individually: 'Seek the Lord and live.'. Whatever we do, we dare not underestimate the searching rigour of the moral concern of God. He has destroyed worlds for the sake of that moral passion.

Not one of us can rest easy in our beds unless we are sure we have his mercy, and Amos is telling us here how to find it. There are three steps.

1. A personal encounter

'Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba' (5:4–6). Seek the Lord and live.

It is a frightening thing that what Bishop Andrewes said in the seventeenth century is sometimes all too true: 'The nearer the church the further from God.' He was not, of course, talking about the church invisible made up of all true believers. He was referring to the institutional church of ritual and ceremony, of social respectability and middle-class habit. Appalling as it may seem, that kind of church, as often as not, is not a stepping-stone to heaven at all, but a slippery slope to hell. That is what Amos is saying; Bethel, Beersheba and Gilgal were 'churches' like that. People sang hymns there; they said prayers; they went through the routine of worship; but, as far as Amos was concerned, their sanctuaries were doomed. Gilgal would go into exile. Bethel would be reduced to nothing. When the fire of God swept through the house of Joseph, Bethel would have no extinguisher to quench it (5:5–6). So seek the Lord, he says, but do not go to church. 'The nearer the church the further from God.'

What an indictment of institutionalized religion. Yet there are churches today where I would have to say the same: 'Seek the Lord, but do not go to worship there!' That is not prejudice; there are evangelical Bethels as well as Bethels of other traditions. The point is that the only sort of church where we can find salvation is a church where the word of the living God is available to us and where the living God can be encountered by us.

The Bethels, the Gilgals and the Beershebas of this world, for all their religiosity, know nothing of him. So God is forced to say, 'Seek me and live.' If you want to find mercy do not look for it in the ritual of the church. Do not be satisfied with secondhand religion. You must have direct one-to-one dealings with God yourself, a personal encounter with him.

And that brings us to the second step in seeking God's mercy.

2. Repent

'Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts' (5:14–15).

The fundamental trouble with Bethel and those other places is that they thought they could seek God without simultaneously seeking goodness. They were just rubber stamps on the worldiness and corruption of their society. They never made anybody feel uncomfortable or guilty. They never demanded moral change in anybody, although their services were probably colourful and theatrical. No doubt they had dynamic preachers in their pulpits, but the word 'repentance' was not in their vocabulary. If we are to find God's mercy, that word has to be there, says Amos.

Some people, of course, mistake wounded pride for repentance. Full of remorse at their stupidity, they think that is what the Bible means by penitence. It is not. Others mistake fear of the consequences for repentance. Afraid of

punishment in this world or the next, they think that this is repentance. Again they are wrong.

Amos is very emphatic here about what repentance really means. He tells us first of all that it must be *God-centred*. 'Seek *me*,' he says, 'and live.' True repentance is taken up with thoughts not of my wounded ego or of the judgment to come, but with thoughts of the personal God whom I have offended and with whom I am now face to face.

Not only is it God-centred, he says, it is *active*. It does not sit wallowing in self-pity. It gets up and starts living a new type of life. 'Seek good, not evil.'

There are two things in particular to notice about that. The first, in verse 15, is the emphasis on a social dimension to this goodness. 'Maintain justice in the courts.' God draws no line between private and public morals. Repentance must embrace both. We have to get out of the individualistic cast of mind which thinks we are responsible only for the things we have personally done against the Ten Commandments. It is much bigger than that. We are part of a world that has gone wrong, and we share its guilt. A religion that is obsessed with personal holiness, but which is content to let society go to the dogs, is not based on true repentance; it is just self-indulgent pietism. True repentance makes people into the salt of the earth and the light of the world: the sort of people who work for justice in the courts. There has to be that social dimension to our repentance.

Secondly, Amos emphasizes a volitional as well as an intellectual commitment to goodness. He says, '*Hate* evil, love good.' That means he is not just asking for a mental decision in favour of goodness. He is asking for a change of heart. He is demanding that we in our own persons reflect that moral passion that God feels: hating evil and loving goodness. Repentance is far more than turning over a new leaf or making a few New Year resolutions. It involves a radical new beginning to our whole thinking

and feeling about life. To use Jesus' phrase, it involves a new birth (Jn. 3:3). Seek the Lord and *live*. This new lifestyle is an expression, says Amos, of a new life.

And so we arrive at step three of our quest for mercy.

3. Humbly ask God for grace

'Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph' (5:15). Does that word 'perhaps' worry you? Does it sound slightly uncertain? Yet if God were to promise grace to complacent sinners too easily, they would probably take him for granted and add the sin of presumption to their other sins. That 'perhaps' is there for a very important reason: we have no right to mercy, and we make the biggest mistake of all the moment we start thinking we do. God is not some mechanical forgiveness-dispenser who responds automatically and predictably to our religious initiatives. He is sovereign, and if he bestows mercy it is an act of his sovereign pleasure, his grace.

There is a story told about Napoleon that illustrates this point. A young soldier in his army was on a capital charge, and his mother came and fell before Napoleon begging for her son's life.

'Please,' she implored, 'have mercy on him.'

Napoleon responded, 'Why should I have mercy on him? He does not deserve it.'

'If he deserved it,' the boy's mother replied, 'it would not be mercy.'

If you and I want to find mercy, this above everything else must be clear to us: we do not deserve it. All we can do is humbly ask God for it. But those who seek God's mercy, perhaps consumed with anxiety, can take consolation from one fact. In the whole history of the world, there is no record of any humble and repentant sinner ever seeking that mercy in vain. 'Whoever comes to me', says Jesus, 'I will never drive away' (Jn. 6:37).

'Seek me and live.' That is the invitation God holds out

to us; an offer of mercy. But listen to the background music. The funeral march is already playing!

5

THE END OF FALSE HOPES
Amos 5:16–27

Prosperity and religion

You might have thought that prosperity would be the bane of religion. After all, the more materialistic and wealthy people become, surely the less their interest is likely to be in spiritual things. Yet, whereas that might be true of some religion, we are going to discover in this chapter that it is by no means true of all. In fact, there are certain brands of religious enthusiasm which positively thrive in an affluent society. There are several reasons for this and I will mention just two.

The first is that affluence does not diminish human anxiety; in fact it increases it. If you want evidence of that, you have only to compare the incidence of stress-related illnesses in the West with those in the so-called underdeveloped countries. More than that, affluence does not relieve human boredom; it only aggravates it, expanding leisure time and so multiplying the need for novel absorbing forms of recreation and amusement.

On both these counts, religion can prove most therapeutic. For a start, it talks a lot about hope, and that is a great comfort for the anxiety-ridden materialist who is haunted by fears of economic recessions, revolutionary coups, international debt crises and the like, not to speak

of his own personal budget and debts. In addition, religion frequently offers a good deal of harmless popular entertainment: festive occasions as convivial as any party; spectacular ceremonials as diverting as any circus; personal discipline as challenging as any sport. It is not surprising that for many worried and bored members of the affluent society, religion, far from losing its appeal, attracts an almost obsessive interest.

Where some consult their psychotherapist, these people consult their priest. Where some tune in to the television soap opera, they tune in to Jesus. Where some go to play golf, they go to play church. Where some turn to Valium, they turn to God. There is no point in denying it: religion for many, even in our affluent society today, is little more than a form of escapist entertainment, a defence mechanism against the tension and the tedium of modern living.

Marx said, 'Religion . . . is the opium of the people,' and in some ways he was not far from the truth. Where he was wrong, of course, was in thinking that religion's narcotic property would appeal primarily to the downtrodden proletariat. Not so! If anything, it is among the prosperous bourgeoisie that such addiction is most rife.

Prosperous Israel

Consider Israel in the eighth century BC as an example. Here was an affluent society if ever there was one. The economy, as we have seen in earlier chapters, was booming. Yet, at the same time, the populace was bursting with religious enthusiasm.

One might have thought that such a situation would have been gratifying in the extreme to a prophet like Amos. Which pastor does not want to see his church (not to mention his offertory bag) full? – and the sanctuaries of Israel were packed with wealthy clients every day. Yet what word from the Lord does God's spokesman bring to

this people? 'Woe to you' (5:18)! 'I hate, I despise your religious feasts' (5:21). 'I will send you into exile beyond Damascus' (5:27).

Why does Amos show such antipathy? Because this was not true religion. It was just escapist entertainment, an affluent society cannibalizing its religious traditions in order to alleviate the anxiety and boredom born of its own prosperity.

Look at the two particular aspects of their religious cultus upon which Amos fastens his critical eye. In verses 18–20, it is their *fascination with the future*, 'the day of the Lord'. In verses 21–27, it was their *preoccupation with devotional activities*, what he calls 'feasts and assemblies'. The choice of those two aspects of religion is not without significance. History shows that popular religion almost always excels in precisely these areas. They are the classic features of escapist pietism.

Of course, neither of these religious interests is necessarily escapist. A sense of the imminence of the end of the world, a joy in corporate worship and in devotion to God – these can be signs of real spiritual renewal. But Amos is warning us that the popularity of this kind of religious enthusiasm on its own does not necessarily indicate revival any more than does the enthusiasm of the crowds at the disco or the football match. In fact, such religious enthusiasm may perform a remarkably similar social function. Not every hope in which people find peace of mind is genuine. Not every sort of worship in which people find emotional release is genuine. There are such things as false hope and false worship, and it is the task of God's minister, not only to call people to the kind of religion where they may find salvation, but also ruthlessly to demolish the artificial comfort and the spurious satisfaction of that religion which cannot save at all. That is what Amos is doing here.

Complacency about the future

'Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light' (5:18).

To understand this, we have to realize that the Bible is convinced that history is going somewhere. Time is a finite linear progression. It began on what the Bible calls 'the first day' (Gn. 1:5) and it will end on what the Bible calls 'the last day'. (*e.g.* Jn. 6:39). So existence is not a labyrinth without a plan, no matter how perplexing our lives may sometimes seem. History is not a cycle perpetually repeating itself, no matter how often historians may repeat one another. The Bible asserts that, behind the apparent confusion of events, there is a throne upon which sits an unruffled Sovereign, calmly and methodically working out his purpose. That is the Bible's vision of the universe. There is a goal, there is a destiny, there is a day towards which time is inexorably moving, 'the day of the Lord'.

The day of the Lord

So significant is that day in the Bible that scholars have invented a rather formidable word to describe the field of study surrounding it: *eschatology*, the doctrine of the last things. There are few more important branches of biblical theology. Again and again, as we read both the Old Testament and the New, we encounter eschatological perspectives: from Isaiah to Peter, from Zephaniah to Paul, from Jeremiah to Jesus. In fact, we could almost define biblical religion as 'living with the end of the world in mind'.

That being so, let us ask the question again: why is Amos so negative about the eschatological enthusiasm of the Israelites of his own time? Surely the interest they displayed in the last things was a cause for congratulations, not pessimism and dejection. They longed for the day of

the Lord, we read. They could not wait for it to come. Imagine their conversation:

'The price of petrol is going up again, Baruch. Don't know how I'm going to keep the Rolls running.'

'Praise the Lord anyway, Joshua, old pal, the day of the Lord is coming, you know!'

Or perhaps, 'The papers say the Assyrian army is getting stronger again, Baruch. Might be trouble from them in a few years' time.'

'Have no fear, Joshua. Remember – the end of the world is near!'

Perhaps if you had gone to their bookshelves you would have found them crammed full of booklets and paperbacks with lurid covers and sensational titles: *The Millennium, Fact or Fiction?*; *Fifteen Signs of the Last Times*; *The Identity of the Antichrist.* Imagine what crowds gathered when one of their favourite preachers turned up with his slides and wall charts, eager to unravel with uncanny precision his definitive analysis of the last seven years of world history!

Eschatology was meat and drink to them, yet Amos says to them, 'Woe to you!' – a Hebrew lament over a dead body, a cry of desolation and grief.

It is important to notice that the reason for Amos's unhappiness is not that he doubted whether the day of the Lord was coming. He was just as certain as all the other biblical writers that the day of the Lord would arrive. He lamented in this dramatically gloomy manner because he knew that that day, when it did come, would be quite different from what those Israelites were anticipating. 'Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light.'

The day of the Lord, whenever it is mentioned, especially by the Old Testament prophets, always has a dual aspect – a light and a dark side, if you like. On the one hand, it is portrayed as a day of salvation, the ultimate

vindication of God's people in a world where often they are called upon to suffer. On the other hand, it is also portrayed as a day of judgment, the ultimate sanction against sinners in a world where evil often seems to be victorious.

Without that dual emphasis in its eschatology, biblical religion would be a mammoth confidence trick. If there were no rewards for the righteous and no penalties for the wicked, morality would not count for much in this universe, no matter how hard the Bible tried to pretend that it did.

People sometimes complain about the 'naivety' of a belief in heaven and hell. But that dualism of human destiny is simply the correlate of the dualism observed in our human morality. Right and wrong are not mere social conventions invented within time by human beings. They are absolute values, intrinsic to the nature of things and eternal in their significance. The polarized nature of God's finale to history is the guarantee of that. There has to be a dark and a light side to the last day, because there is a dark and a light side to human beings.

The problem with these Israelites was that their eschatology was decidedly one-sided. As far as they were concerned, the day of the Lord would be unalloyed sweetness and light. No hint of disquiet at the darker side of things ever furrowed their brow. It was not the vindication of goodness that they were looking forward to, but a good time to be had by all. The day of the Lord for them was an escapist fantasy: an escapism Amos brilliantly parodies: 'It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him' (5:19).

This piece of situation comedy would have done credit to Charlie Chaplin. Do you see the picture? A man is strolling through the forest. Suddenly he sees a lion and he bolts from it. In terror he dashes round a corner, only

to run headlong into the furry paunch of a grizzly bear. Panic-stricken, he flees from the bear's grasp. Now pursued by two predators, he seeks security in his log cabin. Panting with exhaustion and relief, he leans on the wall to recover his breath, only for a rattlesnake hiding in the timber to rear its head and bite him. It is a brilliant piece of visual irony.

Amos is parodying Israelite escapism by caricaturing it. 'Look!' he says. 'You are just running away. You flee from your present anxieties, clutching on to this hope of the day of the Lord like a lucky charm. One day you are going to wake up and realize that that day is a time bomb. No matter how hard you run, you cannot escape the dark side of the day of the Lord. Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light; pitch dark, without a ray of brightness?'

Universalism rebuked

It seems to me that this has a great deal of relevance to the contemporary church. For a start, it is a rebuke to what is called universalism, the opinion held in certain Christian circles that hell is just an empty threat on God's part; in reality everyone will go to heaven. Amos says this is not so. That was the kind of attitude the Israelites were adopting. It would be very pleasant if we could agree with then. It would let preachers out of some of the most unpopular things they have to say. But it is not so. There is a dark side to the day of the Lord, and those who ignore it are living in a fools' paradise.

A warning against triumphalism . . .

More than that, it is a warning against triumphalism, the idea that the church is heading for great times and that we must not allow pessimism or caution to weaken our

optimism about it all. This belief is erroneous. One thing the prophets are quite emphatic about is that the day of the Lord will judge the institutional church as well as the pagan world. It does not do to be too optimistic.

. . . and millennialism

This passage is a warning too, against what is called millennialism. There are certain brands of evangelical religion that are so completely obsessed with thoughts of the imminence of Christ's return that this doctrine seems to consume all their interest and obscure everything else. Amos is very cautious about that kind of fanaticism. The Bible does not tell us about the end of the world merely to satisfy our curiosity. The primary function of future prophecy is to galvanize us into moral action here and now. God did not send prophets to Israel to amuse their bored minds or to soothe their anxious hearts. He sent them to turn the people to repentance. 'The day of the Lord *is* coming. Be different, change, get ready.' That was their message.

The same is true of New Testament prophecy. The book of Revelation was not written so that cranks could tie themselves in knots trying to identify this or that cryptic symbol. It was written to stir up seven churches, to most of which the Spirit said, 'I know your deeds . . . Repent.'

Interest in Christian eschatology which does not result in a passion for ethics is worthless. More than that, it is dangerous, because such interest fails to understand the dire consequences that the last day will have for those who encounter it in a state of moral complacency, as these Israelites were in danger of doing. The logic is always the same, spelt out by Peter in his second letter: 'You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God' (2 Pet. 3:11–12).

So Amos says to all universalists and triumphalists and

millennialists, 'Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light.' The future offers no prospect of refuge for unrepentant sinners, no matter how religious they may be.

Let's look now at the second component in their escapist piety.

Preoccupation with devotional activities

'I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps' (5:21–23).

One word much used by sociologists today is 'privatization'. It refers to the way in which modern man has tended to opt out of public issues, such as politics and economics. He leaves them to the experts. Instead, he tries to express his individual freedom and seek his personal fulfilment within the much smaller sphere of his family, his hobbies and his private life. The word may be new, but the phenomenon is not, at least as far as religion is concerned. Privatized religion is something identifiable again and again throughout history.

Privatized religion

Perhaps the best example of it in the Bible comes from the days of Elijah, when Jezebel was introducing Baal worship and persecuting the prophets of Yahweh. We read on that occasion that several hundred prophets were fearful of the queen's axe and went and hid in a cave (1 Ki. 18:4). We

are not told what they did there, but I have little doubt that they had a real glory time in that cave, singing their Scripture choruses into the small hours. Loyal to God though they were, the trouble was that theirs was a privatized piety. The world had got too hot for them, so they had withdrawn into an escapist holy huddle. In the process they left poor Elijah lonely and isolated trying to do something about the state of the nation all on his own. It was a classic example of privatized religion, the kind of pietism that reduces spirituality to purely devotional terms.

Those prophets in the cave at least had the excuse that their lives were in danger. Perhaps there are times when the church has to go underground to survive. Be that as it may, no such excuse was available to the Israelites of Amos's day. No-one was persecuting them. But it is clear that, to all intents and purposes, they might just as well have been in a cave too.

What did religion mean to them? Verse 21 speaks of 'religious feasts', what we would call the festivals of the church calendar such as Christmas and Easter. They had three such feasts a year, which tended to last weeks rather than days. Verse 21 also speaks of 'assemblies', what we would call rallies, conferences or conventions. Clearly the traditional festivals laid down in the Jewish law were not enough to satisfy the thirst of the Israelites for religious meetings. So they organized more to augment the programme. Then in verse 22 we hear about 'offerings' – 'burnt offerings', 'grain offerings', 'fellowship offerings'. To a Jew these were the equivalent of Holy Communion, prayer meetings, family services. They represented the routine of corporate worship, a routine which they obviously observed punctiliously. Finally, in verse 23 we read about 'songs' and 'harps'. Clearly the Israelites believed that sacred music ought to be given a prominent place. Choral liturgies, organ recitals, special soloists or congregational hymnody, they loved it all.

All that, added together, amounts to religion conceived entirely in devotional terms. It is privatized religion. Alec Motyer calls it 'religion in a box', religion put in a little compartment of life, kept discreetly apart and not allowed out.

But what is wrong with observing the traditional festivals, attending conferences and praising the Lord in music? It is good to keep the religious elements in Christmas and Easter. It can be a great spiritual boost to go to a special convention. It is commendable to maintain the habit of regular attendance at church. There is nothing more enjoyable than singing a good hymn or two. God's people have always done these things. What is wrong with them?

Nothing at all! Except that in certain circumstances, God says they nauseate him. That is not an overstatement. Look at the repeated first-person pronoun and the intensity of the vocabulary. 'I hate, I despise' your harvest thanksgivings and your carols by candlelight. 'I cannot stand' your Keswick Conventions and Bible Weeks. 'I will not accept' your Sunday services and your prayer meetings. 'Away with the noise' of your mass choirs and your music groups! Does it shock us to think that this could be God's verdict on the devotional activities of our churches?

Do not misunderstand Amos. He is not issuing a blanket condemnation of all forms of public worship. Though there are some scholars who have tried to argue that this was his purpose, it would be totally inconsistent with the rest of the Bible. No, it is 'your' worship God says he cannot stand, 'your' feasts, 'your' assemblies, 'your' offerings, 'your' songs, 'your' harps. This is not a general expression of distaste and disapproval but an expression specifically addressed to Amos' audience. There was something about these Israelites that made their religious devotions, for all their dedication, utterly obnoxious to the God they were supposed to be worshipping.

Justice and righteousness

What was that objectionable something? Amos tells us: 'But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' (5:24).

Like that of the prophets in the cave, this religion was privatized. It had neither relevance to nor influence upon the public sphere of their national life. It had no interest in words like 'justice' and 'righteousness', and God simply was not satisfied with that.

If there is one thing that the study of Amos is going to do for us, it is going to make it clear that nothing pleases God more than righteousness and that without righteousness nothing pleases God. What is more, by 'righteousness' God never means mere personal morality; he means the pursuit of *social* justice too. These Jews were totally ignoring that moral and social dimension of their religion. To them religion was just a hobby:

'Nothing to do today, Azariah? Let's go and see what's on at the local shrine this weekend. You could do with a bit of a holiday. Maybe the choir will be singing that new number of theirs, and anyway, you know you always feel better when you've been to church.'

It was a pastime, a form of escapist entertainment.

Exploitation and corruption were running rife in their society, but they played church and tried to forget about all that nasty, worldly stuff. If they had thought about it, even for a few seconds, they would have realized the essential inconsistency in their attitude. 'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings for forty years in the desert, O house of Israel?' (5:25).

Of course the answer to that question is 'yes'. Though again some scholars have tried to argue the opposite, it is straining credulity to breaking-point to suppose that Moses never instituted any ceremonial ritual in Israel. However liberal your critical theories of the Pentateuch, that idea

takes some swallowing. No, Amos knew as well as anybody that sacrifices had been offered in the wilderness. The point was that those sacrifices were offered within a solid and emphatic context of moral law, not just ritual purity. Those Jews learned through hard experience in the wilderness that God expected obedience: obedience far more than sacrifice. God demanded a society permeated with justice and righteousness 365 days a year; a justice that rolled on like a river, a righteousness that flowed like a never-failing stream. The desert of their wandering turned into the fertility of the promised land only when it was clear that that kind of reliable obedience would irrigate their society.

What is more, God made it very clear to them right from the start that, once that tide of justice dried up, so would their title to the land. Moses had said that if they did not obey the Lord their God, if they did not follow his commandments, then 'the Lord will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers. There you will worship other gods, gods of wood and stone. You will become a thing of horror and an object of scorn and ridicule to all the nations where the Lord will drive you' (Dt. 28:36–37). Amos's message for this pietistic but morally corrupt nation is that God was about to carry out that very threat: ' "You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god – which you made for yourselves. Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus," says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty' (5:26–27).

The margin references make it clear that the Hebrew of these verses is not very easy to sort out. Some commentators believe that Amos is here accusing the Israelites of adding idolatry to their other sins.

There is a problem with that, however. The two gods he is almost certainly mentioning are astral deities of Assyria – Sakkuth and Kaiwan. It is unlikely that that particular form

of idolatry would have been very popular in Israel at this time since it would almost certainly have been perceived as political treason. Amos does not mention such idolatry anywhere else; nor does Hosea, his successor, though he refers to the worship of Canaanite fertility gods a great deal. My own view is that Amos is not making an accusation here, but rather issuing a judicial sentence.

Just as Moses had threatened, they would soon be banished to foreign countries and there compelled to worship foreign gods, idols of stone and wood. Amos goes so far as to identify the conqueror – Assyria! Israel would be forced to suffer the awful humiliation of carrying Assyrian idols, made with their own hands, in procession out of the promised land they talked so much about, into the far reaches of the Assyrian empire.

And that is exactly what did happen, in 721 BC. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but that was just about forty years after Amos spoke these words (see verse 25).

Here, then, is religion in an affluent society: fanatically millennialist, enthusiastically pietistic. Yet God says to them, 'Woe to you. I cannot stand you.' It was escapist, privatized religion, designed to comfort but never to challenge, to amuse but never to disturb. It was a spiritual rubber stamp on the corrupt values of the affluent society they belonged to. It was religion without moral and social consequence. It was religion without a conscience.

A challenge to the church

Once again, these words of Amos have immense relevance for the church today. First, we too must beware of millennialist social indifference. It is improper to use the biblical expectation of the end of the world as an excuse for relinquishing our obligations to make society just and righteous here and now. Yet there are plenty of evangelical groups doing just that. Some even make it a matter of doctrine

that a Christian must not vote or enter the political arena. These are 'worldly' things, they say. We must wait for Christ to set up his spiritual kingdom. There is no point in trying to make things better in this fallen society. Can you imagine that Amos would have agreed with that? He says to us, as he said to Israel, 'Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord. . . . Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' That is your moral obligation. Do not sit around looking up at the skies waiting for heaven to arrive by rocket. Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream. Religion which is not interested in immediate justice and righteousness is not true religion at all. It is just escapism.

Secondly, we too must beware of privatized piety. It is totally unacceptable for Christians to withdraw from the public sphere of social concern into a holy huddle of spiritual devotion.

Yet there are many groups who do precisely that today. In fact, one of my fears about the renewal movement lies in this area. Some in the charismatic housegroups especially seem to be interested only in the church. They have little concern for or theology of the *world* and so have something of a ghetto mentality. They talk much about 'prophecy', but I see little evidence of any Amos or Elijah or John the Baptist rising from within their ranks to rebuke the powers that be. They talk much about the 'kingdom', but I see little public assertion of the royal authority of King Jesus over a secularized society. Amos directed the pietists of his day back to the formative experience of the people of God in the wilderness. Maybe it is appropriate for us to do the same to the renewal movement in the twentieth century.

Do we really believe that Jesus came to earth 2,000 years ago to teach us how to have quiet times and run a housegroup? Was devotional life the central plank of his teaching? Of course he prayed, he worshipped and, for all

I know, he sang choruses, but is that what the formative experience of the Christian faith is all about? I suggest that you have only to read the gospels to realize that there is far more to it than that.

Another danger that Amos cautions us about in our churches these days is that of religious entertainment. People sometimes say to me as they are leaving at the end of a service, 'I did enjoy the service today, Pastor,' and then they catch themselves, slightly embarrassed, and apologize, remembering the sermon a little bit and thinking that perhaps 'enjoy' was not quite the appropriate word.

I know exactly what they mean, and I have no doubt that there is a sense in which hearing God's word, even when it is rather awesome, ought to be an enjoyable experience for us, provided we understand the word 'enjoy' in the right way. But we must beware if enjoyment is all we are after. For there are thousands, tens of thousands, I suspect, who take part in church services today with just that in mind: enjoying themselves, and no more.

To some it means going into a beautiful old building and hearing the choir. For others, it means staying at home and watching a religious television programme. For some, it means participating in a spiritual rave-up, with plenty of clapping and boisterous singing, a real emotional catharsis. To others it means listening to an extremely highbrow lecture conducted by a learned theologian from a pulpit. For some, it will mean donning their leotards and dancing for Jesus, aerobic praise. In every case, I fear there may be nothing more spiritual about all this activity than if they were going to the cinema, the pub or the dancing-class. Beware of religious entertainment. That is not what true worship is about.

Amos warns us also to beware of superficial success. Packed churches are not necessarily a sign of spiritual revival. They can be a symptom of terminal spiritual decay. That is the awful thing. Israel was forty years away from

disaster and the churches were swimming with people.

The great danger of modern attitudes towards evangelism is that we are content to count heads when numbers can be so hopelessly deceptive. Numbers are a necessary, but by no means a sufficient, criterion of revival. It is quite possible to arrange exciting mass meetings, to have overflowing churches and yet to be experiencing no real revival at all. That is where these people who boast that they are going to 'organize' revival make their mistake. It is changed lives that count; God is not fooled by multitudes. Real revival does not just make the church bigger; it makes society better.

The historian J. R. Green speaks of the eighteenth-century revival in England in these terms: 'Religious revival in the eighteenth century carried to the hearts of the people a fresh spirit of moral zeal which purified our literature and our manners. A new philanthropy reformed our prisons, infused clemency into our penal laws, abolished the slave trade and gave the first impulse to popular education.'

These are the fruits of real revival. Until we see them in our own country, beware of superficial success.

A challenge for us

Yet as I read the book of Amos and apply it to my heart, the greatest challenge of all, perhaps, is directed not at the church but at the individual. Do you not see a great warning here against self-deception? These were religious people, people who believed in the second coming, people who believed in prayer meetings. Yet they were in grave spiritual danger. The most frightening words, I think, that ever fell from the lips of Jesus are: 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven.' Many, he says, will come to him on that last day (the day of the Lord, of which Amos speaks), and will say, 'Lord, Lord, we did this, and we did that'. 'Then I

will tell them plainly,' says Jesus, 'I never knew you' (Mt. 7:21–23).

That surely is the most disturbing feature of these verses. Here were people who thought themselves safe, who derived great comfort from their religion. Every Sunday they were there in church. They felt secure, and yet they were on the edge of a precipice. It is not enough to be keen. It is not enough to get emotional satisfaction from a prayer meeting. It is not enough to enjoy singing hymns. It is not even enough to look forward to going to heaven. God is looking for *moral* change in us.

'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," . . . but only he who does the will of my Father.' The test is not *saying* or *feeling*; the test is *doing*. Of course we cannot earn eternal life by our good deeds or our social concerns. Salvation is a gift for which we shall be eternally grateful. But here is the crunch: it is impossible to receive that gift of salvation without being changed by it. Salvation is not an ornament that we are given simply to put on the shelf and admire. It is like a new suit of clothes. God expects us not only to own it, but to wear it. And only by wearing it daily in practical living can we really be sure we have got it.

That is why John says that if we say we have fellowship with him, but go on living in the darkness, we are liars (1 Jn. 1:6). That is why James says we must do what the word says, and not just listen to it (Jas. 1:22). The test is obedience. It is not enough to listen. It is not enough to agree. It is not enough to feel inspired. The faculty Christ must control in us if we would be sure of heaven is our will. It is what we are going to do with our life that counts.

That is why, in spite of all the New Testament's emphatic rejection of any idea that we get to heaven by good deeds, the New Testament still says we shall be judged by our works. God will not have to ask us, 'Did you believe?' if we are saved people. If we are saved people,

the evidence will be there when the books are opened and our lives are examined.

When it comes to the last day, actions speak louder than words. So you had an emotional experience at an evangelistic meeting? So you signed your name on a card for the evangelist to see? So someone put their hands on you and you spoke in tongues? Real religion is not feeling but doing, and that is what Amos is saying to us. Do not tell me you have been filled with the Spirit; so was Saul before he was rejected as king (1 Sa. 10:10; 15:10). Do not tell me you have made a decision to be a disciple; so did Judas. Do not tell me you go to church every Sunday; the Pharisees worshipped faithfully every sabbath.

Real repentance shows in our works, in our deeds, in our moral conduct and our concern for social justice. That is what it is all about. Beware, then, of false hopes.

Of course, there is a danger in too much self-examination. Some Christians lack assurance, not because there is no evidence of obedience in their lives, but just because they are so obsessed with looking for it that they drive all peace from their hearts. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases complacency in spiritual matters is a far greater peril than excessive introspection. Beware of self-deception.

Obedience is what God is looking for. Until that ethical dimension is clearly evident in our lives, until we can say, 'Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream in us and in as much of the world as we can touch,' perhaps we should not be too keen to hasten the end of the world, no matter how many prayer meetings we attend.

6

THE FRUIT OF COMPLACENCY
Amos 6:1–14

The ruling classes

Every time there is a change of leader in the Kremlin we are reminded (if we need reminding) that socialist states, for all their polemic, are still governed by a ruling class. They may wear fur hats rather than gold coronets; they may style themselves Comrade rather than President or Right Honourable, but the Politburo is no less autocratic than was the court of Tsar Nicholas. As Milovan Djilas, the former Vice-President of Yugoslavia, has pointed out, societies controlled by a Marxist bureaucracy are classless in name only.

To be fair, some sociologists such as Vilfredo Pareto have argued that it is unrealistic to expect anything else. Such is the structure of modern nations that a power elite is inevitable, whatever ideological foundation you build upon.

Perhaps it is possible to aspire to a representative 'government of the people . . . *for* the people', but a truly participatory 'government of the people *by* the people' is so impracticable as to be out of the question. Power is bound to be wielded by the few rather than by the many.

The best democracy can hope to do is to attempt to substitute equality of opportunity for privilege of birth.

But, as the historian R. H. Tawney pointed out many years ago, equality of opportunity is not the same thing as classlessness. Equality of opportunity is simply freedom to compete within a stratified society. The ruling classes are not eliminated, they are opened up to penetration from the lower ranks. So aristocracy is deposed only to be replaced by meritocracy, in which the rule of the rich and the high-born is usurped by the clever and successful. Yet it is debatable whether the distribution of power is any less elitist under that scheme.

As G. K. Chesterton comments in his poem 'The Secret People':

> The last sad squires ride slowly towards the sea,
> And a new people takes the land: and still it is not we.

Perhaps the sociologists are right when they say it has to be like that. Perhaps there is no practicable way of preventing the emergence of a governing minority, however things are organized. Certainly it is difficult to point to any developed nation where a similar centralization of power has not occurred. One thing is sure, the most appalling brutalities and injustices committed on this globe since civilization first awoke upon it have not been performed by the masses (though they may have been perpetrated in their name), but have been committed by the individuals and parties who have sought to rule the masses.

That is why, no doubt, the Bible spends a great deal of time addressing, not just the man in the street, for all his faults, but the people at the top. Moses and Pharaoh; Elijah and Ahab; Isaiah and Ahaz; Jeremiah and Jehoiakim; Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar; John the Baptist and Herod – the Bible is laden with examples of the way the prophetic word has confronted the ruling classes. It did not question their legitimacy in the name of some revolutionary egali-

tarianism, but challenged their morality in the name of God's righteousness.

In this chapter we come to one such incident. Verse 1 of chapter 6 focuses on two particular cities, Zion (that is, Jerusalem), and Samaria, the capitals of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Within those two metropolises Amos focuses down further upon one particular social group, those he calls the 'notable men', literally 'the first'. We would call them the top brass, the upper crust, the gentry, the high-ups, the establishment. Amos is not speaking to *hoi polloi*, he is assailing the corridors of power.

Whether elites are inevitable or not, he does not say. What he is clear about is that elites are accountable. Their rank may set them higher than others, but it does not set them above the law of God. It was Amos's task to remind them of the special responsibility they bore for the social decadence over which they were presiding.

In doing that he provides us with material of immense relevance to our contemporary world. Amos 6 is a word for our Prime Minister and Cabinet; for the President of the USA and his White House advisers, for the Soviet leader and his Politburo. In short, it is a word for anyone and everyone who exercises power in this world, be they politicians, industrialists, financiers or generals. What that word is, is spelt out for us in verse 1: 'Woe to you who are complacent in Zion' (6:1). Smugness is a dangerous attitude in anybody, but when it becomes a characteristic of those who hold the reins of power in a society, it is rather like sunbathing on the slopes of an active volcano: pleasant while it lasts.

The condition of the ruling classes

'Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation, to whom the people of Israel come! . . .

You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph' (6:1, 4–6).

We have already noted how in previous chapters Amos has painted a bleak picture of social degeneration within Israel. He has told us about bribery and corruption in the courts, the oppression and exploitation of the poor, empty religiosity and sexual immorality. In short, he has described for us a society which was in danger of disintegrating for lack of moral fibre.

'Let them eat cake'

What, you might ask, were the powers that be doing while all this was going on? The answer to that question is a large round zero! They were doing *nothing* about it. Ensconced in their palatial villas in the superior parts of the capital city, they surrounded themselves with opulent luxury. Amos tells us that they were lazy, spending large parts of the day lolling on the new fashionable style of ivory-clad chaise-longue, which they had had specially designed. They were gluttonous, dining regularly on lamb and veal delicacies, prepared by their cordon-bleu chefs, while almost certainly meat would have been a once-a-year treat for the vast majority of the population. As for alcohol, they drank their claret and their vintage port by the pitcher rather than by the glass.

Perhaps most characteristic of all, they were affected, patronizing the arts in a pretentious attempt to appear cultured and sophisticated, even to the extent of taking up music as a hobby in order to recapture the classical atmosphere of King David. They pampered their bodies too, with the best-quality imported cosmetics. Amos hints

that they applied it with almost religious assiduity. Verse 6, in the Hebrew, evokes a ritual anointing; it was a real art-form, putting on the aftershave in the morning!

Immersed in all this extravagance, says Amos, they felt safe. They felt secure. They were complacent. Insulated from the miseries of the poor, they could not care less what was happening outside their own privileged little social clique. 'You do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph' (6:6).

In pre-revolutionary France, Queen Marie-Antoinette's famished peasants came to Paris and cried for bread. 'Why,' she is reputed to have said, 'if they have no bread, let them eat cake.'

There is the same air of political unreality in these dissipated members of the Israelite aristocracy. Of course the people came to the capital to present their complaints and petitions before these nobles. To whom else could they go? When they had filled in the necessary dozen official forms, they might have got to see some minister of Jeroboam's government, or at least the Under-Secretary to the Minister or perhaps the Under-Secretary's personal assistant. When at last they had penetrated the red tape and gained the ear of these top men, what did they get? Lounging back on his bed of ivory, barely concealing a bored yawn, his Ministry stamp in one hand and his whisky and soda in the other, the official spokesman gave them the latest government statement on the national economy. The grievances of the people, says Amos, were being allayed not by government action, but by government propaganda. With remarkable insight Amos identifies for us the three fundamental stratagems of the propagandists which were being used then, as now.

Attention diverted

First of all, he says, these rulers diverted the people's attention from the real problems by pointing them to places

that were worse off than they: 'Go to Calneh and look at it; go from there to great Hamath, and then go down to Gath and Philistia' (6:2). The next two lines should read, if we follow a perhaps preferable alternative reading 'Are *they* better than *these* kingdoms? *Is* their land larger than yours?'

This is a 'government communique'. Amos is sarcastically imitating one of the official spokesmen from Jeroboam's palace as he replies to some delegates who have come to express a complaint.

'What is the matter with you all?' he would say. 'Look at Hamath, next door to us; would you rather live there? Look at the inflation rate in Gath. Your standard of living would not be higher there, would it? Take a ticket and go to Calneh and see the problems they have. You never had it so good. Do you not realize that we are the top dogs these days? We are the foremost nation. You are lucky to be born an Israelite.'

They divert the public's attention from problems by pointing to places that are worse off: classic propaganda.

Success exaggerated

Secondly, the policy is to exaggerate any minor national success so as to obscure major national failures: 'You who rejoice in the conquest of Lo Debar and say, "Did we not take Karnaim by our own strength?" ' (6:13).

Lo Debar and Karnaim were battles that Jeroboam's armed forces had recently won, and so they became ideal material by which to boost the military pride of the nation and the kudos of the government. It was a kind of eighth-century-BC 'Falklands factor', a slight war in comparison with the sleeping menace of Assyria. Israel at this time was a puppy-dog barking at a lion. The real threat could be successfully hidden from public awareness by this smoke-screen of a big media coverage of the Lo Debar and

Karnaim campaigns. Only Amos, it seems, saw the irony in it, for in Hebrew Lo Debar means literally 'nothing'.

It is a classic propaganda campaign again: leaders exaggerate minor national success to obscure major national failure.

Reassurances given

The third thing a government might do is to reassure the people by making strong optimistic statements in the newspapers. 'You put off the evil day' (6:3). In other words, 'Don't worry, it will never happen.'

In the 1920s a pharmacist called Émile Coué set up a famous clinic at Nancy based on the idea that people would recover from illness if only they kept on repeating this formula: 'Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better.' If you said it over and over to yourself every day you would improve, he claimed. It was a type of autohypnosis. That kind of psychotherapy is applicable to whole societies too. Fill the newspapers with strongly worded statements confidently affirming that things are fine, and people believe it.

'What is all this talk about an evil day? Nonsense! Don't believe a word of it! Everything is under control. No need to panic. Amos and his kind are just scaremongers. Every day and in every way this country is getting better and better!'

These have been propagandist techniques for centuries: divert; exaggerate; reassure. And it works because men and women always prefer a soothing lie to a disturbing truth. They would much rather live in the fantasy world of government publicity than the tempest of political reality.

The prophet of God cannot afford to be blinded by that kind of official blarney, though. So, when every other voice cries 'Peace, peace', the pulpit must face the facts. The self-satisfaction and the self-indulgence of the national

leadership must be rebuked, if for no other reason than that the whole country must pay the penalty for their criminal complacency.

So Amos goes on to expose the propaganda campaign for the tissue of lies it is, declaring the consequences to the nation of the delusions of its leaders.

Assurances undermined

To begin, he cuts the ground from under their confident assurances. 'You put off the evil day and bring near a reign of terror' (6:3). Official optimism may keep the lid on things in the short term. 'You can fool all the people some of the time,' but you cannot ignore for ever the decay, the social issues, or the crime that threatens the country. Political complacency in the short term is just a recipe for political instability in the long term. Leaders put off the evil day only to bring nearer a reign of terror, for sooner or later the bubble will burst. They will have not just an evil day on their hands then, they will have a whole reign of terror.

Amos's words came all too true. In 2 Kings 15:8–31 we read that after the death of Jeroboam II (who was king at the time when Amos was preaching here), Israel had three kings within a year. The first two were assassinated by their usurpers. A dozen years later there were two more coups in quick succession. Israel was bathed in blood.

That story could be paralleled from our history books many times. We have already mentioned Queen Marie-Antoinette. The indifference of the French monarchy to the people was a major factor precipitating that bloody reign of terror we call the French Revolution. Without the negligence of the imperialist reign in Russia, 1917 might have gone very differently for the Tsar.

When governments arrogantly close their eyes to the dissatisfactions that are brewing amongst their people, they

give an open invitation to extremist elements who want to exploit that dissatisfaction to further their own political ends. Complacency among political leaders brings its own retribution. You push away the evil day today, says Amos, only to invite the day of violence tomorrow. The way to make a nation stable is by dealing radically with problems, never by sweeping them under the carpet. Propaganda may preserve your power temporarily, but what a nation really needs is not politicians who are thinking of the next election, but statesmen who are thinking of the next generation.

Military pride demolished

Amos moves on to demolish their exaggerated military pride.

'Do horses run on the rocky crags? Does one plough there with oxen? But you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness – you who rejoice in the conquest of Lo Debar and say, "Did we not take Karnaim by our own strength?" ' (6:12–13).

Do you see what he is saying? You cannot run a country on a few petty military victories. If a country is to achieve stability it must be on the basis of social justice, not mere border security. Internal problems are of far greater significance than external ones. He uses a typical folk proverb to make the point. It is as futile to try to drive horses up cliffs, or to plough those cliffs with a yoke of oxen, as it is to try and run a country without a concern for righteousness.

'Yet that is exactly what you are trying to do,' Amos warns Israel's leaders. 'People cry for deliverance from exploitation and oppression, and all they get from you is a nasty taste in the mouth and a pain in the stomach. And you think Lo Debar and Karnaim are a social antidote to that kind of moral indifference? That is ridiculous. You

are attempting the impossible. What counts in the long run is not military strength, or territorial acquisition, but God's blessing. And God blesses society only when he sees standards of moral and social conduct upheld. Your military pride, for all its media coverage, for all your May Day processions, is misplaced. God is determined to break it.'

'The Sovereign Lord has sworn by himself – the Lord God Almighty declares: "I abhor the pride of Jacob and detest his fortresses; I will deliver up the city and everything in it" ' (6:8).

'Do you boast of your glorious victories, your impregnable defences, your military displays? "By our own strength," you say, "we did this and we did that." You will learn,' says Amos, 'that your national destiny does not lie in your own hands after all. God will bring you down.'

Misfortune prophesied

The third way that Amos challenges their propaganda is by insisting that, instead of sneering at the misfortune of other cities such as Calneh, Hamath and Gath, they should reflect soberly on the misfortunes which would shortly be their own. 'If ten men are left in one house, they too will die. And if a relative who is to burn the bodies comes to carry them out of the house and asks anyone still hiding there, "Is anyone with you?" and he says, "No," then he will say, "Hush! We must not mention the name of the Lord" ' (6:9–10).

These are cryptic verses and it is difficult to be sure what kind of scene is depicted. Ten men in one house is obviously overcrowding, so Amos is saying either that there has been so much destruction of living quarters that people are having to press into whatever shelter they can find, or that these ten men are fugitives from the battle, hiding

from further reprisals by marauding enemy troops. Then again the word for 'bodies' in verse 10 means literally 'bones', which is perhaps meant to convey extreme famine conditions. The mentioning of burning, rather than burying, suggests either that the quantity of corpses is so great there is not the manpower to dispose of them in the normal way, or perhaps that they have died from some infectious disease.

Whatever the precise scene Amos is portraying here, it is clearly a picture of a population reduced to the point of near extinction, so much so that when the undertaker calls and enquires politely of the sole survivor in this house, 'Is there anybody left alive there?' he superstitiously hastens to cut short the oath that he senses will follow the embittered negative reply. 'Ssh,' he says, 'do not swear, however much you feel like it. Do not use the Lord's name in vain, or he will make the situation even worse for us.'

Amos vividly brings to life before his listeners the appalling carnage that proud Israel would suffer: the emergence of Assyria, smashing indiscriminately the houses of rich and poor as they advance towards the capital, the great house smashed into pieces, the small house into bits. The memory of those pathetic victories Lo Debar and Karmain will seem like a sick joke when those who boasted of their military might find themselves on the receiving end of enemy occupation.

'For the Lord God Almighty declares, "I will stir up a nation against you, O house of Israel, that will oppress you all the way from Lebo Hamath to the valley of the Arabah" ' (6:14). The whole length and breadth of the country will be affected by the invasion. But perhaps the most ironic comment of all is in verse 7, where Amos declares that those ruling classes who had the reputation of being the first of the first, 'the notable men of the foremost nation' (6:1), will have the honour of being 'first' to the bitter end: 'Therefore you will be among the first

to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end' (6:7).

At the last the ruling class will taste the bitterness of those waters of injustice that they themselves had allowed to become foul. The music of their decadent parties will become just an echo in their memory to haunt and torment them in a foreign land. All this, says Amos, is the fruit of complacency; which is why he began his sermon, 'Woe to you who are complacent in Zion' (6:1).

All this has implications for us today.

The nation

First, there is a clear lesson about how important it is that we think carefully about the kind of leaders we choose.

It was Joseph de Maistre who made the famous observation that 'every nation has the government it deserves'. Democracy may not have eliminated our power elite, but it has at least given us the opportunity to elect who that elite shall be. We are no longer the victims of hereditary privilege. We choose our own leaders. Amos warns us to choose wisely. Above everything else, he says, look for people who *care*, who have the kind of burden for the nation that is able to 'grieve' at the thought of its ruin.

Amos did not approve of the lavish lifestyle of the Israelite nobility, but I feel that he would have been prepared to forgive a good deal of it if only it had been matched by a sincere concern about the state of the nation. But they could not care less, that was the problem. These callous aristocrats, obsessed with their own self-interest, were totally indifferent to the gross injustice that was daily growing in their country, the country they were supposed to be running. 'You do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph' (6:6). One senses that there are tears of indignation in Amos's eyes as he says that.

The word 'compassion' has become a left-wing political slogan today, which is unfair on the right for I cannot say

that I have noticed left-wing governments to be any less ruthless than right-wing ones when the situation demands it. But whether from right or left, we dare not appoint leaders over us who do not care about people.

Governments sometimes have to make difficult decisions. They have to send armies into battle, knowing that soldiers will be killed. They have to budget the national economy, knowing that workers will be made redundant. One should not criticize a government for making unpopular decisions, if it feels in good conscience that those decisions are in the best interests of the nation. But we can and ought to criticize our leaders if they do not care about the lives that are being lost or ruined in consequence.

Amos says to the leaders of this and every other nation, just as he said to the leaders of Israel two and a half millennia ago, 'Beware of complacency. Beware of dry-eyed politics. "You do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph." ' God wants national leaders who go beyond sentimental rhetoric, who show a demonstrable concern for the welfare of people, who put social issues high on the agenda of their political interests. If we are wise, we shall see to it that that is the kind of politician who wins elections in our own country.

The church

We must never forget when we read this prophecy of Amos that it is not directed at a secular state, but at Israel. And Israel is the people of God. Israel is the 'church' of the Old Testament. That means that we dare not treat the hallowed walls of a Christian sanctuary as some kind of refuge from the severity of Amos' words, as if we could point the finger at the seat of government and say, 'That is all meant for you rulers,' because it is not. It is for the church, too. It is not for nothing he says in 6:1, 'Woe to

you who are complacent *in Zion*.'

This chapter, surely, warns the church against self-reliance. 'I abhor the pride of Jacob' (6:8). God detests pride at any time, but never more violently than when he finds it among his own people. He has gone out of his way to eliminate the possibility of it by making the weak and the helpless recipients of his blessing. He never stopped warning the Israelites, in the book of Deuteronomy, not to fall into the trap of self-congratulation, as if it were their righteousness or their strength that had made them prosper. It was not. It was God's grace.

He says the same in the New Testament to the church. 'God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things . . . the lowly things . . . the despised things – and the things that are not.' Why? Says the apostle, so that nobody, no human being in this world, will ever boast before God (1 Cor. 1:27–29). Yet the church, like Israel, often does boast: 'Did we not take Karnaim by our own strength?'

The American media evangelist, Robert Schuller, who has a glass cathedral in California, tells us how he set upon the great adventure of getting that glass cathedral built. He began his ministry in Chicago, and then was invited to Orange County in California to begin a new church there. 'I decided to first visit the area,' he says in his book *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking*. 'It was my moment of decision. It was nearly midnight. Wide awake in the top bunk of the Santa Fe Railway car, I stared out of the window. The train was stopped now high in the Arizona mountains. A full moon fell on the snow-covered pines. Suddenly a deer leapt from behind a tree and bounded off into the moonlit night, spraying dry snow dust in his trail. Then it came to me. The great, positive, possibility thought, *the greatest churches have yet to be organized*.'

Is it just my British prejudice that does not like that word 'organized'?

Our problem today is that we find it incredibly difficult to distinguish faith from mere self-confidence.

'Didn't we do well to get a lovely new church like this? Aren't we clever to see it full every Sunday? Isn't the future bright with promise for such capable Christians as we all are?'

'Woe to you who are complacent in Zion! . . . You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile' (6:1, 6–7).

It was unimaginable to the leaders of Israel that that vast prosperity would be reduced to a pile of ruins in a single generation. I suspect that we cannot imagine that our successful churches today could quickly become barren shells. But Israel was devastated, and so will we be if we do not heed the warning of Amos to eschew self-reliance. Of course good organization is valuable in a church – but the corpses in the mortuary are no less dead for being well arranged!

The only technique that the church dares to depend upon is that which Zechariah specified to King Zerubbabel when he stood on the ruins of proud Jerusalem: ' "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty.' That is the only way God's people ever prosper, when they realize that it is dependence on God's Spirit that counts and when they learn to beware of complacency.

Individuals

There is also an application to us as individuals. 'You put off the evil day and bring near a reign of terror' (6:3). It is not just governments that embrace that kind of propagandist false assurance; people do it, too. 'I'm OK, thank you very much. What do I need God for? I'm healthy, wealthy, and even wise – at least by comparison with that

poor devil over there. I can cope. Look at the things I have achieved. I'm a success. Religion is for failures, neurotics, grieving widows and craven inadequates. But I'm not in any of those categories. I'm still young. I want to enjoy myself. Maybe I'll turn to religion when I get old. Maybe I'll need it then but, right now, everything is just fine, thank you. Every day, in every way, things are getting better and better with me.'

Amos says to us, just as he said to the leaders of Israel, 'Beware of complacency. You put off the evil day. Do you not realize you are bringing near the reign of terror? Oh yes, you can put off dealing with spiritual things. You can push your nasty premonitions of the future to the back of your mind. You can forget you are a dying person. You can enjoy the affluence of the present moment. But there is a point of no return with that kind of attitude, and you can slip over it hardly being aware of the fact!'

The question we have to ask is, when the time comes when we do want to pray, will we be able to do so? Or will it be with us as it was with that sole survivor in his overcrowded Anderson shelter with only nine corpses to keep him company? When the need to cry to God for help arose, all the use he could find for God's name was as a swear word. Every day on which we postpone having personal dealings with God is an open invitation to such spiritual disaster.

In Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* the character in the title role confronts his last moments of life in dark despair:

> Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,
> And then thou must be damned perpetually!
> Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,
> That time may cease, and midnight never come;
> Fair nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make
> Perpetual day, or let this hour be but
> A year, a month, a week, a natural day,

That Faustus may repent and save his soul!
O lente, lente currite noctis equi:
The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.
O I'll leap up to my God: who pulls me down?
See see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament.
One drop would save my soul, half a drop, ah my Christ.

It is melodramatic, and mediaeval in its imagery, but make no mistake about it, Marlowe's Doctor Faustus reflects many twentieth-century men and women. People who, like Pharoah, have hardened their hearts once too often, find, too late, that they have been gambling with their destiny. So beware of complacency.

7

THE END OF GOD'S PATIENCE
Amos 7:1–9

God's patience

Have you ever noticed that many virtues, to be truly virtues, have to exist in tension with some contrary quality or attitude? Take courage, for instance. We sometimes call a courageous person fearless, but if he really did have no fear at all, there would be no virtue in his bravery. Courage is resolution in the face of fear. That is what distinguishes the valour of the hero from the recklessness of a daredevil.

Another example is humility. Can a person be truly humble unless he simultaneously possesses a large measure of self-respect? Is not that the difference between meekness and servility, self-effacement and self-depreciation? There is nothing particularly virtuous about an inferiority complex. To have no pride at all, no sense of personal dignity, is not to demonstrate humility but to be incapable of it.

To put it another way: virtues require effort. If a thing comes easily to us it cannot truly be regarded as a virtue. Chastity is no cause for congratulation in a eunuch. Augustine wrote many years ago, 'To abstain from sin when one cannot sin is to be forsaken by it, not to forsake it.'

The virtue which exemplifies this point better than any other is surely patience. There can be no true patience

unless we are also truly vulnerable to provocation.

I remember visiting a couple once with several teenage children. The kids were upstairs playing pop music at a decibel level approaching the limits of physical pain. When I arrived, the lady of the house graciously went into the kitchen to make tea, and I tried to open conversation with an elderly relative who was staying with the family at the time. She was seated, a little glassy-eyed, in an armchair. Considering the din bellowing down through the ceiling, I thought she seemed remarkably calm and unperturbed.

'How do you stand it?' I asked.

Blank incomprehension greeted me. I lifted my voice a little higher, straining to get over the thump of guitars and drums.

'How do you stand the noise?' I repeated.

A spark of life appeared. 'Hang on, dear,' she said, and fumbled in her pocket. 'Can't hear a thing without my aid switched on.'

What I had taken for extraordinary self-restraint was simply deafness, not so much to be commended as a virtue as regretted as a handicap. The point is obvious: patience is no virtue at all unless the person exercising it has been genuinely provoked.

Now that is a very important thing to understand when it comes to appreciating the character of God. There have always been people who have entertained such sentimental notions about the love of God that they find it quite impossible to imagine God ever being angry.

One of the most scholarly expressions of this point of view appeared in the 1930s from the pen of C. H. Dodd, then Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at Manchester University. He wrote an influential commentary on the book of Romans, in which he makes this statement: 'We cannot think with full consistency of God in terms of the highest human ideals of personality and yet attribute to him the irrational passion of anger.'

(C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans, Moffatt New Testament Commentary*, 1932; reprinted Fontana, 1959.)

The argument he makes in that book is that God is not personally angry with anybody. What the Bible calls the 'wrath of God,' he says, is in fact an impersonal system of cause and effect. Just as a stone falls down because of the law of gravity built into the universe, so sin leads to suffering because of a law of morality built into the universe. It is quite wrong to picture God in heaven as being personally involved in that system, as though he were wreaking vengeance on wrongdoers. That sort of idea, Dodd says, is primitive and sub-Christian.

Of course, there is an element of truth in Professor Dodd's point of view. We do live in a moral universe and there is a sense in which God does not actively have to do anything in order for man to reap the painful consequences of his evil actions.

Yet I cannot agree fully with Professor Dodd. For if God cannot be in any sense angry with people, what do we mean when we say he is being patient with them? If God is not subject to real and intense provocation by human sin, then all those Bible words such as long-suffering and mercy, even grace, become emptied of all meaning. A God who cannot be angry does not need to be gracious, or merciful, or long-suffering. As in the case of the old lady who had switched off her hearing-aid, the composure of such a God would reflect not patience but insensitivity.

That cannot be right. Professor Dodd, in stripping God of what he calls irrational passions, has stripped him also of his virtue. The Bible is not so careless. It is never embarrassed to assert that God is personally affronted by sin and that he personally executes judgment on sinners. Indeed, that is a major theme of the book of Amos. The prophet says repeatedly that we must not make the mistake

of interpreting God's long-suffering towards sinners as divine indifference to sin. We must never fall into the trap of moral complacency.

In chapter 7 Amos brings that central lesson of his entire book to its sharpest focus. 'Make no mistake about it,' he says, 'human failure to meet God's moral standards provokes God. It provokes him intensely, and it is only by virtue of a supreme demonstration of divine patience that that provocation does not lead to immediate summary destruction for those responsible for it.' That is the lesson of these three visions which Amos gives us in 7:1–9.

A God who relents

Locusts

'This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up. When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, "Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" ' (7:1–2).

Those of us who have grown up in the comparative security of twentieth-century urban Western affluence can scarely imagine quite how terrifying that first vision would have been to a man such as Amos, whose roots were in the agricultural community. A swarm of locusts can literally strip the land clean. An entire harvest can be there one day and gone the next.

Traditionally in Israel there had been a measure of insurance against that kind of disaster in that the land produced two crops a year. So if one crop were lost in this way, there was still the other to rely upon. But in Amos's Israel, as this passage hints, that protection had gone. Because the royal tax man now took the first harvest, in order no doubt to sustain the economy of the aristocracy

and the army, the rank and file of the population were totally dependent on that late crop which they sowed hurriedly after the king's share had been cut and before the dry season began. If that crop were devastated by locusts, as Amos is envisaging in these verses, nothing stood between the people and famine on a vast scale. It is no wonder that Amos cried out, 'How can Jacob [*i.e.* Israel] survive?'

Holocaust

Nor is the second vision any less disquieting: 'The Sovereign Lord was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. Then I cried out, "Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" ' (7:4).

If the first vision was what we would call 'a natural disaster', what Amos foresees here has a markedly supernatural aspect to it, because this is no ordinary bush fire he is speaking about. It dried up 'the great deep' – a phrase which had cosmic rather than geographical significance for a Jew. The great deep was the primeval chaos into which God spoke at creation to produce a solid and habitable world. So, translating this vision into the language of the twentieth century, we might say Amos is shown here a nuclear holocaust, so gigantic that it threatens to disintegrate the very material fabric of the globe. No wonder that he cries again, 'How can Jacob survive?'

Both these visions, then, depict indiscriminate destruction of terrifying proportions. It must have been with a considerable sigh of relief that Amos, as though awaking from a nightmare, saw these scenes of horror fade from his imagination and heard God say: 'This will not happen . . . This will not happen either.'

An objection

Maybe there is a niggle of irritation in some of us on reading that God says this. Perhaps we are tempted to ask, 'If this destruction is not going to happen, why should God inflict upon poor Amos the nightmare of its possibility? If God didn't really intend to destroy Israel by these draconian means, why did he bother to talk about it at all? Doesn't empty sabre-rattling like that smack of a sadistic streak in the divine personality? At the very least it suggests that God cannot make up his mind. What is the point of issuing harrowing threats and then tamely relenting from their execution?'

That is the sort of thing inadequate parents do when they are harassed by naughty children, but we would not expect to find such weakness in God's discipline. I think the answer to that is quite simple. God portrays these fearful judgments and then dismisses them in order that Israel may learn precisely the lesson we have just been discussing: that he is being patient with her sin, not just indifferent to it.

Notice who it is that Amos sees here preparing the locusts and calling for the inferno. It is the Sovereign Lord himself, not some impersonal moral principle inherent in the nature of things. Amos is left in no doubt here that God has been personally enraged and is seriously contemplating personal retribution. So, when we read that 'the Lord relented' (7:3, 6), we are in no danger of misinterpreting his action. We know he is angry. We know how close to disaster Israel had stepped. If she has been spared, it is not because God is insufficiently provoked but because he has bitten back his wrath. He has decided to exercise patience, real patience.

Of course, if we were going to be theologically pedantic about it, we would have to say that God has not really changed his mind. To that extent Professor Dodd is right.

God's anger is not a fit of temper that he has to fight to keep under control. He always knows full well what he intends to do. He is not subject to irrational passions. That is why we read in 1 Samuel 15:29, 'He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind.' The Bible's attitude is that it is a mark of human beings that we vacillate and change our minds, but omniscience admits of no uncertainty and no caprice.

Yet the Holy Spirit here still dares to speak in anthropomorphic terms of God relenting (or, as the word could quite properly be translated, repenting). He does that so that we may be absolutely clear that God's anger is real and personal. We must not mistake his patience for moral indifference. The Holy Spirit would rather risk our imputing to God irrational passions, than that we, like Professor Dodd, should come to the conclusion that God is incapable of feeling angry at all.

The lesson is plain. Amos would have us realize that, simply because God allows a corrupt society to go on enjoying peace and prosperity in the short term, it does not mean that that society is safe.

To bring it closer to home, just because God allows you to go on enjoying health and good fortune in spite of the fact that you persistently reject his authority over your life, that does not mean that you are safe. On the contrary, you may be hovering on the very brink of catastrophe.

A God who answers prayer

'I cried out, "Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" So the Lord relented' (7:2–3). 'Then I cried out, "Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" So the Lord relented' (7:5–6).

The divine patience did not come into operation auto-

matically. Amos could not presume upon it. He had to obtain it, and the way he obtained it was by prayer. That is worth noticing. It is just one among many examples in the Bible of the way God's anger can sometimes be averted by the intercession of a mediator.

If we look back in the book of Genesis, we find an example in the life of Abraham. When Sodom was under threat of destruction, Abraham prayed for the city. 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?' he asks, and we are given a most remarkable account of how Abraham almost bargains with God for the city (Gn. 18:23–33).

There is another splendid example in Exodus, where Moses appeals on behalf of the Israelites. God says, 'Now leave me alone that my anger may burn against them.' But Moses pleads, 'Turn from your fierce anger.' And we read: 'The Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened' (Ex. 32:9–14).

Indeed, if we study the Old Testament as a whole we find that a recognized part of the prophet's duty is to intercede for other people. 'He is a prophet,' God said concerning Abraham. He will pray for you' (Gn. 20:7).

Amos gives us a superb example of this kind of intercessory ministry, and of a particularly selfless kind. We have to remember that he came from Judah, the southern kingdom. Israel at this time was at least 75% of the way towards being an enemy of Amos's homeland. A lesser man would have gained considerable nationalistic satisfaction from the prospect of her being devastated by locusts or supernatural flames. Yet we find him praying for her deliverance, and doing so with evident emotional commitment. There is a dramatic intensity about his petition. It is like an emergency call; he speaks in imperatives. 'Sovereign Lord, forgive!' he cries (7:2). There is an agonized urgency about it. 'I beg you, stop!' (7:5). The clear implication from the passage is that his supplications were effective.

The patience of God did not overrule his anger until Amos prayed that it might do so. Then the Lord relented, as a direct consequence.

Once again there may be some who would wish to raise an objection at this point. Does prayer *really* have the power to alter God's plans? Surely not! If I really thought I could divert God from what he thought he ought to do to some alternative course of action determined by my fallible wisdom, why, I would never dare pray again! We have only to think of the mischief that results from people in folk tales who are unconditionally granted three wishes to realize that the idea of getting anything we want in answer to prayer is terrifying, unless we are megalomaniacs.

One of the characters in Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Lothair* (1870) actually goes so far as to say, 'I am not clear we ought to pray at all . . . It seems very arrogant in us to dictate to an all-wise Creator what we desire.' Isn't there is a measure of truth in that?

It is certainly true that Muslims take that attitude. They generally limit their communications with God to prayers of worship with very little petition or intercession, since it would be irreverent to seek to tell the all-powerful, all-knowing God what to do. Moreover, it would be pointless; the will of Allah is immutable. It is something we must accept. We cannot try to change it.

Yet, as we have seen, the Bible is full of examples of people doing precisely that, in the confidence that they are neither being impertinent nor wasting their breath. 'The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective,' says James, and he cites Elijah's meteorological influence as a practical example of that (Jas. 5:16–18).

How can it be that an omnipotent God allows himself to be manipulated by human beings in this way? The answer is once again simple. God *chooses* to work in that way. No doubt he could run the universe by arbitrary

decree if he wanted to; he is the Sovereign Lord. But he has chosen very often to work in response to prayer in order to make clear to us that his judgments are not impersonal, mechanical decrees. He is not a callous Nemesis who metes out vengeance upon evil-doers with ruthless and unentreatable inflexibility. There is a very real sense in which God does not want to inflict retribution on people, even when he does it, and the Bible says so on a number of occasions.

Notice what Amos appeals to in his prayer. 'Sovereign Lord,' he says, 'forgive!' So there is *mercy* in the heart of God, to which Amos can appeal. 'How can Jacob survive? He is so small!' So Amos can appeal to *pity* in the heart of God, too.

Someone once said of Dr Temple, the headmaster of Rugby, that he was a beast, but a just beast. Amos would have us know that God is just and that there is absolutely nothing bestial about his justice at all. On the contrary, it is humane and compassionate, wonderfully open to entreaty. We are not to think of God as some cruel, arbitrary tyrant.

Once again, if we were going to be theologically pedantic, we would have to agree that Amos's prayer has not really altered God's eternal plan. As John tells us in the New Testament, the only prayers that God promises to answer unconditionally are those that are asked 'according to his will' (1 Jn. 5:14). Prayer is a means of obtaining blessings God is already willing to bestow, not of manipulating him to do things he does not really want to. That is magic, quite different from prayer. Luther puts it very succinctly: 'Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance. Prayer is laying hold of God's willingness.'

Prayer matters

But this does not mean that we ought to treat prayer as a mere rubber stamp. No, prayer makes a real difference! For this universe is not controlled by some inexorable and mechanical fate, but by a caring person who delights to demonstrate the long-suffering side of his personality. He is not indifferent; he is patient, and one of the ways he makes that clear is by delivering men and women from the destructive consequences of his anger against them in response to intercessory prayer on their behalf.

This is a tremendously important lesson, for the implication is that intercessory prayer, prayer for others, is not just a good thing for Christians to do; it comes very close to being a duty. The apostle Paul tells Timothy: 'I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2:1–4).

What Paul is doing there is transferring that mediatoral function of the Old Testament prophet to the New Testament church. What Abraham had done for Sodom, what Moses had done for Israel, Christians are to do in this new-covenant age for the world: we are to pray for it. God is patient; he does not delight when anybody perishes. There are reserves of pity and mercy which we may appeal to, and Paul urges us to do so.

If the disciples had realized that, they would not have suggested to Jesus that they call down fire from heaven on the Samaritan villages which had rejected him. 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of,' Jesus said, 'for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them' (Lk. 9:55, margin). 'Bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you' (Lk. 6:28). Jesus rebuked

them, and Amos, by his example here, rebukes us.

There is such a thing as the sin of prayerlessness. Samuel realized that. He said to the people of Israel, 'Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you' (1 Sa. 12:23). God has put us in this world to seek people's salvation, not to gloat over their destruction. Even though there must be an uncompromising message of judgment upon our lips, as there was upon Amos's, there must also be a fervent and compassionate prayer for mercy in our hearts. That is our Christian duty.

A God who says 'Enough!'

'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. 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" ' (7:7–8)

In the opening chapter of this book we drew attention to the observation of the poet Dryden: 'Beware the fury of a patient man.' We saw that to be incapable of anger altogether is no sign of moral character; it indicates rather moral cowardice. A truly good person suffers long, but he will not suffer indefinitely. Eventually his patience will be exhausted.

The reason for that is now clear. There can be no real patience without real provocation, and if that provocation continues unchecked, eventually anger will be expressed. God may relent in judgment once, twice, a dozen times, but there will come a time when he says, 'I will spare them no longer.' God may heed the intercession of a godly person, once, twice, a dozen times, but there will come a time when he says, 'Enough! The praying must stop.' That

is what we see here. Notice that Amos utters no prayer this time.

The cynic may say that if that is the case, all this talk about God's patience is so much sentimental eyewash. Amos's prayers in fact achieved nothing except a moratorium. What we call patience is just God counting up to ten and then losing his temper just as he was going to do in the first place.

If you look carefully, however, you will see that that is not the way it is. This third vision is nowhere near such a nightmare of devastation as were the first and second visions. God said of those, 'This will not happen' and they did not happen. The verdict was categorical. He rejected decisively a policy of total and indiscriminate destruction, even though that is what his moral indignation justly demanded. What we see here in its place is a much more selective judicious approach. In place of locust, plague and holocaust, we have a plumb-line.

What a refined and delicate instrument of judgment a plumb-line is. As architect of Israel, God had built her national constitution according to strict norms of moral rectitude. Now he had returned as surveyor to evaluate how far his building standards had been obeyed. Such a survey was after all part of the contract.

God is 'compassionate and gracious . . . slow to anger,' says Moses. 'Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished' (Ex. 34:6–7). That is why Amos cannot appeal against the plumb-line. Amos is forced to recognize the limits of divine moral tolerance. Though God's anger is not a fit of irrational temper (and to prove that, he will relent from indiscriminate slaughter), and though his judgment is not a ruthless and mechanical fate (and to prove that, he will respond to prayers for deliverance), nevertheless his anger is real. His judgment is real, and to prove it, there comes a point when he says, 'Enough!'

'I will spare them no longer. 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' (7:8–9). Notice the first-person singulars: *my* sword, *I* will rise. Professor Dodd may wish to call it primitive but it is not sub-Christian. It is simply the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God, just as evident in the words of Jesus as in these words of Amos. The God of the Bible is personally provoked by sin and eventually his patience is exhausted.

A day will come when God's patience will run out, when every one of us will be placed against his moral plumb-line and judged accordingly. It would be pleasant if this were not so, and if all this talk of an angry God were old-fashioned fanaticism, but I cannot say that.

There is a sin which leads to death and which no prayer can absolve (1 Jn. 5:16). There is a decree which condemns to hell and from which no deliverance is possible. If it were not so, we could not speak of God's patience at all, only of his moral indifference.

When God brings in the plumb-line, what excuse will we offer for the bulges in the wall and the erosion in the pointing? God has strict building standards when it comes to constructing a lifestyle. Do we think we shall meet them? If we are honest, we must entertain some doubt about it. As Paul puts it in Romans, 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). And God is provoked by that universal sinfulness in which we share.

Peter tells us that the Lord is not slack about the day of judgment. 'He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance' (2 Pet. 3:9). God holds back from summoning us to immediate judgment for one reason only: to provide us with an opportunity to repent of our sin. But if our response to that amnesty which he grants is simply to grow complacent in our godlessness, we have to beware, for there is all the difference in the world between being granted probation

by the judge and getting away with the crime.

Paul asks: 'Do you show contempt for the riches of [God's] kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath' (Rom. 2:4–5). God is patient, but the time will come when he will say, 'Enough! I can stand it no longer.'

8

GOD'S SPOKESMAN
Amos 7:10–17

The establishment church

On 28 October, in the year AD 312, Constantine the Emperor of Rome met his rival Maxentius in battle at the Milvian Bridge, near Rome. During the night before the battle, Constantine is supposed to have seen a vision of a cross in the sky, with the words around it, 'In this sign, conquer.' As a result of that vision, he ordered the sign of the cross to be painted on the shields of all his soldiers. The next day he defeated Maxentius, attributed his victory to the God who had given him the vision, and professed conversion to Christianity.

Ever since then it has been a source of debate as to whether the events of that October day were a triumph or a disaster for the church. Within a matter of a few years, the faith which Rome had persecuted with ferocious cruelty intermittently for two and a half centuries had not only been granted toleration but had become the official religion of the Empire. The Emperor began to chair church council meetings. Churchmen such as Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea and church historian, were great personages at court. Military might was invoked to crush theological dissent. Imperial favour was sought to secure ecclesiastical appointments. Bishops who would once have been

martyred found themselves politicians instead, and politicians, bishops. Christianity became safe, even fashionable. Stark upper rooms gave way to palatial basilicas, murky catacombs to splendid cathedrals. For the first time people started talking about Christian civilization.

That was very gratifying. You can hardly blame the church for becoming a little intoxicated with her newfound influence in the corridors of power. Yet, in all that success, something had been lost: the seismic fervour of those early Christians, perhaps; the radical demands of their gospel; the clear distinction they drew between the church and the world. Somehow those things got obscured as Christianity gave up its role as a controversial counterculture and became instead respectable, institutionalized.

In a word, the church had become part of the establishment. One way or another, it has remained so ever since. I cannot help feeling that the church should have been more cautious about that move; the Bible is not short of warnings about the dangers of the religious establishment. None are clearer, perhaps, than the collision between Amos and Amaziah that we find in Amos 7.

Amaziah, the establishment person

'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" ' (7:10).

Bethel was to Israel something like what Canterbury is to England: the centre of the national church. It had occupied that role ever since Israel had separated from the southern kingdom of Judah and rejected Jerusalem as its capital. In fact, Jeroboam I had deliberately set up Bethel as an alternative focus for his people's religious enthusiasm in order to sever links with the south all the more completely. From its inception, the priesthood of Bethel had been politically appointed, just as Amaziah himself

says in 7:13: 'This is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.'

Bethel was there to provide a public image of legitimacy for the Israelite monarchy and to bestow an ecclesiastical benediction upon the king's policies. So it is not surprising that Amaziah, priest of Bèthel, was a typical representative of establishment thinking. He received his wages from the royal court of Samaria, and, as is so often the case, he who pays the piper calls the tune.

There is no hint of spirituality in the man throughout this whole exchange. He seems to talk more like a senior civil servant than a clergyman, and, in a sense, a senior civil servant is what he was. As far as he was concerned, Amos represented a threat to the stability of the nation and it was his job as primate of the national church to put a stop to it. Notice how cleverly he turns the screws on the prophet.

Amaziah's strategy: stage one

There are two stages to his strategy. The first is a well-timed letter to the king. The letter has just enough truth in it to make it credible, and yet places an altogether unfair and sinister interpretation on the facts.

'Amos is raising a conspiracy against you,' he tells the king. What a ludicrous suggestion! Who were Amos's fellow conspirators? The only one who conspired with Amos was God himself; he had no human allies. But Amaziah is shrewd enough to realize that governments take political subversion much more seriously than they do religious fanaticism. So he portrays Amos as the author of a seditious plot to overthrow the government. That way the king cannot fail to act.

'The land cannot bear all his words,' he goes on. That is subtle, because, while on the surface it simply says that Amos is an intolerably persistent tub-thumper, when we

read between the lines it implies rather more. 'Amos is a threat to internal security,' it suggests. 'The people are being made restless and dissatisfied by his speeches. I recommend immediate deportation.'

Then comes the supreme master stroke. 'This is what Amos is saying: "Jeroboam will die by the sword." '

Compare that with the record of what Amos was actually saying. Do you notice the difference? Amos had attributed these doom-laden words to God.

'Then the Lord said . . . "with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam" ' (7:8–9).

Amaziah, however, with political craftiness, interprets Amos's oracle as if that first-person singular referred to the prophet himself. 'This is what *Amos* is saying,' he says. In other words, *Amos* is threatening personal violence against the king's life. He has removed the theological context of Amos's message altogether, and reduced it to the level of Machiavellian intrigue.

Perhaps that is all Amaziah could understand. Perhaps religious vocabulary and ecclesiastical office were to Amaziah nothing more than a cover for the pursuit of political goals, as they were to those famous Borgias that Machiavelli so much admired. Perhaps he had become so secularized by his responsibilities in the state cult, that the idea that God might actually be saying something through this voluble Judean yokel was almost unimaginable. Amos had to be some kind of opportunist troublemaker, there was no other explanation. Certainly that does seem to be the unspoken assumption lying behind stage two of his strategy of intimidation.

Amaziah's strategy: stage two

Amaziah delivers Amos a blistering reprimand: '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. Don't prophesy any more at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom" ' (7:12–13).

We need to remember the social dynamics of this to appreciate the psychological disadvantage Amos was under. If Amaziah was the eighth-century BC equivalent of an archbishop Amos by comparison was a nonconformist lay preacher. It was hardly a fair contest and Amaziah does not pull any punches. No doubt waving a carbon copy of his official letter to the king under poor Amos's nose, he warns him in the plainest terms to get going while the going is good. 'This is Bethel Cathedral,' he is saying, 'not one of your rural tin chapels. You are out of your class, Amos. Go back home where you belong. Maybe they will appreciate you there. There is good pay, I hear, for preachers down in Jerusalem, but not a penny is going to come your way in this diocese. Bethel has its own clergy, thank you very much, and we have no vacancies for a rustic Cassandra like you. Be off, then, before the king reads his mail and decides that banishment is too good for a would-be assassin!'

Most of us, I suggest, in that situation would have been hopelessly overawed. It is not easy to stick your neck out when you are talking to an archbishop or to keep your chin up in the face of establishment intimidation. But Amos did. Victimized he might be, terrorized he could not be.

Amos, the called person

In contrast with the establishment person, we have the called person.

'Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore fig-trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel' " ' (7:14–15).

To understand Amos here, we have to remember that prophets were no novelty in Bethel. For centuries a prophetic tradition had been associated with the shrine there – what is called in the Old Testament a school for the sons of the prophets. It probably began in the time of Samuel, hundreds of years before. Certainly the academy was thriving in the days of Elijah, who, we are told, came to Bethel and met a sizeable company of the sons of the prophets there, just before his whirlwind resignation (2 Ki. 2:2–3). In early days these prophetic bands had been staunch upholders of true religion, but it seems more than a little likely that, as time wore on, they became a bit like the priesthood, increasingly institutionalized, increasingly establishment-minded.

For example, we are told in 1 Kings 22:6 that King Ahab, who was an apostate, had about 400 of these prophets in his court on his payroll. And Micah, who is a near contemporary of Amos, complains bitterly about the commercialization of the prophetic office in Jerusalem in his day (Mi. 3:5).

It seems beyond question that these schools for the sons of the prophets had taken on more and more the nature of career training – a bit like going to university – and of course the essential thing about a career is that it should be marketable. There was a market for prophetic oracles in Amos's day, but as in all selling, the secret was to give the customer what he wanted. No doubt job security came into it too, and the royal court offered the prospect of a steady job with a regular income. There was even the prospect of promotion if the king liked your face.

There were many such professional prophets in Bethel at this time, and Amaziah was very familiar with them. That is why he rather assumed that Amos must be of the same stamp, trained in a rival theological seminary maybe, from down south, but in it for the money just like all the rest. Hence his rather sarcastic comment: 'Go back to the

land of Judah. Earn your bread there' (7:12). The fact is, though, that Amos was different. It is his purpose in his reply to spell out to the worldly-minded Amaziah just what that difference was: 'I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son.'

Scholars debate that verse because in the original language it could be construed with either a past tense or a present tense of the verb 'to be'. It could either mean 'I *was* neither a prophet nor a prophet's son,' as in the NIV, or, perhaps slightly more likely, 'I *am* neither a prophet nor a prophet's son.' If the past tense is correct, Amos is saying, 'I did not apply for the job of prophet. I had no ambition in that direction.' If the present tense is correct, then Amos is saying, I am not a prophet in the way you understand the word, Amaziah, at all. I am not one of your professional soothsayers.'

Either way the implication is clear. Amos is dissociating himself from the official prophetic guilds that were so familiar to his contemporaries. He is saying he didn't belong to them. As far as he was concerned, prophecy was not a career, it was a vocation. It seems to have come as a surprise as much to him as to anybody else. 'I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore fig-trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel" ' (7:14–15). That is as much as Amos tells us about his burning-bush experience, but clearly it turned his life upside down, just as dramatically as Moses' experience had done for him.

How dare this Amaziah suggest that Amos was in prophecy for the money! We can almost hear the outrage in his tone as he spits the accusations back in Amaziah's face. 'What do you take me for, a mercenary time-server like you? No, if I need money, I have flocks and orchards enough back home, thank you very much. I am not here to make a fast buck, still less to plot revolution against your king. I am here because God has sent me.'

And when God says 'Go!' you go, no matter how many archbishops obstruct your path. When he says 'Speak!' you speak, no matter how many archbishops try to silence you.

'Now then, hear the word of the Lord. You say, "Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the house of Isaac." Therefore this is what the Lord says' (7:16–17).

Notice the biting sarcasm in that: 'You say, "Don't prophesy!" Well, you listen to what the Lord says.'

The contrast

The contrast between the establishment person and the called person could not be plainer. The establishment person has political influence; the called person has spiritual authority. The establishment person threatens court action; the called person threatens divine judgment. In his sense of vocation we have the secret of how this nonconformist lay preacher could stand up to the archbishop: his conviction that God had called him gave him an inner resilience, a courage which a hundred Amaziahs could not browbeat. He knew where the real power lay in the country, and it was not in the palace of Jeroboam, still less at the cathedral at Bethel.

'Therefore this is what the Lord says: "Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will certainly go into exile, away from their native land" ' (7:17).

God had rejected the Israelite establishment, including the priesthood. Amaziah's refusal to acknowledge the word of God confirmed his complicity in the national apostasy, and therefore he would have his personal share in her coming holocaust of retribution.

Verse 17 is a sobering end to the chapter. Who would have thought that archbishops could ever go to hell?

There are many lessons for us to learn from this confrontation between the establishment priest and the called prophet.

A lesson for the church

Amaziah shows very clearly the weaknesses of establishment religion. Look at verse 12 again. 'Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy any more at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom' (7:12).

In spite of all the maliciousness of Amaziah's attitude towards Amos, there is something tragic about it. As chaplain to the king he would have been in a unique position to exert moral influence on the nation. In 2 Kings 12:2 we read of a man called Jehoiada. He was a priest too, in Jerusalem, but he splendidly demonstrates the positive potential of such an office in the way he instructed the young king Joash. In our own history books we can learn of a similar achievement by Archbishop Cranmer in the reign of Edward VI. And it ought to be said in defence of the Church of England that in recent years it has become a radical critic of the government on many issues of social importance in Great Britain. Yet, though the opportunity for great influence was there because of his establishment position, it passed Amaziah by. He could have gone down in history as a great reformer. Instead he is recorded in the Bible as just a puppet of the system, a persecutor of the prophets.

I fear to say it, but all too often that is the way with establishment religion. Jesus expressed it when speaking of his own establishment: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often

I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing' (Mt. 23:37).

That story has been repeated again and again down through two millennia of Christian history. In the 1,600 years since Constantine's conversion, hundreds of thousands of Christians have been persecuted just as Amos was. They have been intimidated, exiled, imprisoned, dispossessed, executed, often in horrifyingly cruel ways. The ironic thing is that in a great many of those cases, the persecution of Christians has been conducted not by pagans hostile to the gospel, but by the church itself.

Take for example Hugh Latimer, closely associated with the city of Cambridge. He was a superb preacher, with a passion for the gospel and for social justice. Yet he was burned at the stake in 1555 at Oxford. Why? Because he was a Protestant and at time the establishment was Catholic.

Remember, too, John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, now hailed as a classic of English literature. He was imprisoned in Bedford for twelve years. Why? Because he was a nonconformist, and in those days the establishment was Anglican.

Or listen to this: 'Some they have executed by hanging. Some they have tortured with inhuman tyranny and afterwards choked with cords at the stake. Some they have roasted alive. Some they have killed with the sword and given to the fowls of the air to devour. Some they have cast to the fishes. Some wander about here and there in want, homelessness and affliction, fleeing from one country to another because they are hated and abused by all.'

That is not some church historian describing the persecution of the early Christians by Roman emperors Nero or Domitian, but Menno Simons describing the persecution of Anabaptists by John Calvin, Martin Luther,

Ulrich Zwingli and others. Thirty thousand baptistic dissenters were put to death in Friesland in Northern Holland alone between 1535 and 1545. The consequences of that vicious oppression of religious liberty can be seen in Europe to this day. And why did it happen? Because the Anabaptists offended the establishment.

It is very important to realize that, contrary to the impression one is sometimes given by militant Protestant organizations, the Catholic church was not the only church to persecute dissidents. Reformed churches have done it too.

The one thing all persecuting churches have in common is not their theology, but their political affiliation to the state.

I am not suggesting, of course, that any affiliation between the state and the church is inevitably going to be for the worst; obviously that would be a gross exaggeration. Nor am I suggesting that this chapter of Amos ought to be construed as proscribing such church/state alliances or encouraging Christian anarchism. That would go far beyond what the text permits. But it is important to notice that Amaziah illustrates the three classic dangers into which a state church is always likely to fall unless it is uncommonly self-aware.

First of all, a state church will all too easily become a compromised church, for its vested interest in the status quo and privileged relationship with the powers that be all too easily prejudice its moral judgment and spiritual integrity, as was Amaziah's.

Secondly, a state church will all too easily become a diluted church in which the spiritual calibre, not just of the members, but more importantly of the high-ranking ministers, will be far from ideal. Lord Acton's famous dictum about power corrupting is just as applicable to bishops as it is to prime ministers, as Amaziah proves.

Thirdly, a state church can be and often has proved to

be a persecuting church. For, once state and church join hands, theological dissent can be interpreted as a political crime and religious toleration is imperiled.

While retaining a high regard for very many Christians within established churches, whom I count as friends, I have to point out that these three dangers have befallen most state churches, including the Church of England, and to some extent continue to do so. I have a nagging suspicion that an Amaziah would find speedier promotion to the House of Bishops than would an Amos, even today!

The acid test of any church is how it responds to the voice of prophetic protest originating outside the ranks of its own establishment. Again and again that is where revival has begun, where it has had to begin. In many respects the number of denominations which we complain about so bitterly simply reflects the failure of ecclesiastical establishments to respond to that challenge when it has arisen in history.

Amaziah is a signpost to us all, warning us, whatever our denominational traditions, to beware of establishment religion. Although it has opportunities, it has weaknesses.

Lessons about Christian service

There is a lesson in this chapter, too, about the nature of Christian service. Amos has something to teach us about the motivation that must accompany a decision to go into Christian service.

To put it bluntly, if you are looking for job security, promotion prospects, a good salary and the like, do not become a pastor. While it is possible to do quite well financially as a preacher it is essential that we do not treat Christian service as a professional career. To regard it as such is to head straight for the ranks of the Amaziahs of this world. I am not suggesting that it is wrong to accept financial support for Christian ministry. The New Testa-

ment makes it abundantly clear that that is perfectly acceptable. But it must be regarded as financial support, not as a fee for services rendered. If we are not willing to serve God for nothing, then we are not right to serve him at all.

Secondly, we can learn from Amos something about the flexibility that must accompany such a decision.

Amos had had ideas of his own about what God wanted him to do with his life. They were perfectly legitimate. He was going to be a farmer, and he had got a long way into that career. He did not say he was thinking about becoming a shepherd. Rather, he was in the middle of it. 'I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore fig-trees.' But God redirected him in the middle of what seemed to be a very settled and comfortable situation in life. He was not one of those people then who flopped school, flopped university, flopped this job, flopped that job and then suddenly discovered a call to missionary work. He was doing quite well at his secular employment, but God arrested him and lifted him out of it.

We cannot afford to be too settled, any of us. The exciting thing about being a child of God is that we never know what might be round the corner. We have crossed the Rubicon; we could be in for anything, and we have to be ready for that change. Flexibility is required of those who would think about entering Christian service.

Thirdly, notice the conviction that must accompany a decision to enter Christian service.

'But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, "Go, prophesy" ' (7:15).

Of course, a call to Christian service does not have to be so dramatic or so objective as Amos's seems to have been. After all, he was being appointed to a quite unusual level of spiritual authority. He is one of those handful of people in the thousands of years of God's dealings with the human race whose inspired words would go down in Scripture. None of us is likely to make so fundamental a

contribution and therefore we will not need so supernatural a set of credentials. Many people have been unnecessarily deterred from Christian service by too naive a correspondence being drawn by well-meaning preachers between a missionary call and the experience of St Paul on the Damascus Road or of Moses at the burning bush. Their experiences were special, for obvious reasons.

Nevertheless, while the need for a call can be overdramatized, it is unquestionably true that no man or woman will survive in Christian service unless they have a very clear sense of divine vocation to that task. What would Amos have done in this confrontation with Amaziah if he had not been able to say, 'The Lord took me from tending the flock?' He would have crumpled, and that is what will happen to us if we launch out into a self-appointed career of Christian service. We will crumple. It is only the called person who can stand the strain. So we must beware of the love of money, of getting stuck in a rut that we cannot get out of and of running before we are called.

Fourthly, and this is most important: if we are going into Christian service, we must be our own man or woman. If we are to be servants of God we must retain such a degree of direct and intimate relationship with him that no party or establishment can ever put us in its pocket. Integrity above everything else is required of a servant of God. He must be a person who knows he is accountable directly to his master. We have some accountability to the church, to those who send us, and to those who finance us, it is true, but we can never be in their pockets. The church owes an incalculable debt to its rebels. It is far better to be an Amos on the bishop's carpet than an Amaziah on the bishop's throne. Be your own person. It is important.

9

GOD'S SOCIAL CONCERN
Amos 8:1–14

Questions of ethics

'You cannot have the ethics of Christianity without the dogma.' That was the opinion of novelist Dorothy L. Sayers. But it has to be admitted that, over the last hundred years or so, huge efforts have been expended by people in an attempt to prove her wrong. One of the classic expressions of commitment to a purely secular morality came from the lips of another great novelist and was recorded by the nineteenth-century critic F. W. H. Myers. He tells how, one rainy day in May, he was strolling in the Fellows' garden of Trinity College, Cambridge, in the company of Mary Ann Evans, or, as she is better known, George Eliot, when the subject of morality and religion came up.

He wrote, 'She was stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men – the words *God, Immortality, Duty* – pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first*, how unbelievable the *second*, and yet how peremptory and absolute the *third*.' Myers went on to comment, 'Never, perhaps, have sterner accents affirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and unrecompensing Law.'

George Eliot was actually what was called in her day a free-thinker. Today she would probably be known as a humanist, because humanism is passionately committed to moral values, but, just like her, it refuses to see those values as dependent in any way upon belief in God.

Humanists insist that the first four of the Ten Commandments (the ones about putting no god before God, not worshipping idols, not misusing God's name, and keeping the sabbath) can be deleted without in any way jeopardizing the validity of the remaining six about honouring parents, murder, adultery, stealing, false testimony and coverting. To follow George Eliot, they want to deny God and immortality and yet retain duty. Or to use the phrase of Dorothy L. Sayers, they want 'the ethics of Christianity without the dogma'.

Can that be done? George Eliot insists it can; Dorothy L. Sayers says not. I think the honest answer has to be both 'yes' and 'no'. It is obvious that there are many morally-minded unbelievers in this world. To suggest that every sceptic must by definition be a libertine or a criminal would be a monstrous slander and is totally contradicted by the evidence. Equally, secular morality is feasible in the sense that it is possible to devise philosophical bases for ethics that do not rest on theology. It is not difficult, for instance, to demonstrate that the Christian ideal of goodness is socially expedient. Many atheists would defend Jesus' 'golden rule', 'Do to others as you would have them do to you,' on purely rationalistic and pragmatic grounds without bringing God into it at all.

Yet, while recognizing that humanist ethics exist, they suffer from an overwhelming and irremedial weakness. This weakness is perhaps best explained by an illustration.

Imagine two small boys. They are in the playground, arguing.

'Look, Jimmy Jones, you just stop bullying my little brother.'

'Oh yeah, who says so?'

'You just stop bullying him, or else!'

'Oh yeah, or else what?'

'You just stop bullying my little brother or else I'll get you, that's what!'

'Oh yeah, you and whose army?'

Of course, in that infantile setting, ethical debate is not conducted at a particularly high intellectual level. Nevertheless, the exchange does raise a very vital moral issue. 'Who says so?' asks Jimmy Jones, 'Or else what?' 'You and whose army?' In other words, he is calling the bluff of his accuser. 'I can get away with it,' he reasons. 'Who's to say I can't?' Unless you have a good answer to that impudent disregard of moral rebuke, then your ethics, however noble in sentiment, are utterly powerless in practice, since they can be flouted with impunity.

It would be very nice to think of those two little boys sitting down and having a cosy and civilized discussion on moral philosophy. Jimmy Jones might be convinced that his bullying was unreasonable and that in the interest of social expediency he should desist! But it doesn't happen that way with children. Neither does it happen with adults, for that matter, since there is a streak of moral intransigence in human beings which does not yield to reason, but which sticks out its chin, and with brazen contempt of ethical philosophizing demands, 'Oh yeah, who says so?' 'Oh yeah, or else what?'

To put it in a nutshell, ethics have no cogency in the minds of the ordinary man or woman unless those ethics are perceived, first, to rest on authority and, secondly, to be enforced by sanctions. That is what George Eliot got wrong. You can, of course, have personal moral values without God and Immortality. What you cannot have is any sense of compelling and universal moral obligation. In other words, you cannot have what I think she meant by the word 'Duty'.

Take a practical example that brings us a little closer to the situation Amos describes in chapter 8. Suppose we have a prize-specimen human vulture before us. He is a real blood sucker, a filthy capitalist, a man who has grown rich on slavery and extortion, who even now has thousands of peasants living in disease-ridden hovels in some bankrupt third-world country, their children undernourished and uneducated, growing crops for profits that will go not to relieve their poverty but simply to augment his fat Swiss bank account. What can humanism say to a character like that: 'You had better stop bullying my little brother!'?

The fact is that wicked people get away with an awful lot in this world. George Eliot would no doubt want to insist that this vicious ogre has a peremptory and absolute duty to protect the poor, and would summon any number of rational arguments to support her moral convictions. But what if our capitalist bully-boy simply sneers at her and says, 'Who says so? Or else what? You and whose army?' Humanism, for all its moral conscience, has no reply to a person like that, except perhaps to resort to a revolutionary machine gun – which, of course, is precisely where humanism's moral passion has led it in the last hundred years or so.

To put it another way, you can talk about moral responsibility only if you are prepared to answer the question, 'Responsibility to whom?' The best that humanism can do in response to that is to speak of responsibility to oneself, but that is not an answer. It is an evasion that comes close to being a contradiction in terms, because to speak of responsibility to oneself is to attempt what is practically impossible. You cannot express an imperative in the first-person singular. You can never turn the 'I think' of personal moral opinion into the 'thou shalt' of universal moral obligation. The issue of moral authority, 'Who says so?', and of moral sanctions, 'What happens if I don't?',

have to be convincingly answered or you have no binding ethics.

And the humanist does not have an answer to those questions. Amos on the other hand does. In this chapter, he leaves us in no doubt about the fact that his social ethics and his passion for justice are obligatory. He is not offering us rational arguments against social injustice and asking us whether we agree with them. With the surer moral insight of the little boy in the playground, he is telling us who says so and what happens if we don't.

'Who says so?'

'Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?" – skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat' (8:4–6).

Amos is giving us a picture here of the unacceptable face of capitalism just like the one in our example earlier. Here is an affluent plutocrat of the eighth century BC: 'Business comes first,' he says.

Business before compassion

'You who trample the needy' (8:4). It is not hard for us to piece together the sort of thing that Amos is referring to. First the big man by his virtual monopoly squeezed the small farmer into bankruptcy by competition. Then he purchased his land at a ridiculously low price because he was the only one with capital enough to buy it at all. Then he forced the little man, who now has no land, to work the land for him, for which he pays him subsistence wages. He then heaps the last indignity on to the man's broken spirit by demanding exorbitantly inflated prices for food

the man himself had grown on land that used to be his.

We know that this was going on in Amos's day. It is the law of the increasing misery of the poor which Marx so acutely observed in Europe in the last century. When all the trump cards lie in the rich man's hands, when there is no organized labour union, no state intervention on behalf of the poor, no collective bargaining, no law to prevent oppression of the poor by the rich, then the poor can be literally trampled upon and the whole class of small landowners and small businessmen virtually eradicated. 'You . . . do away with the poor of the land,' complains Amos. Business comes before compassion in such a world.

Business before religion

'When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?' (8:5). No doubt these rich exploiters went to church! They were there every Sunday, probably in the front row. But as they sat there in the pew it was the love of money, not the love of God, that was gnawing at their souls. They went through the mechanics of worship but their hearts were still in the office or in the factory working out new ways to push up productivity, to increase profit, to decrease labour costs. The truth is that though they went to church they could not wait for Sunday to be over so that they could be out making money again. Because business came before religion, it was not surprising that business also came before honesty.

Business before honesty

'Skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales' (8:5). That translation conveys exactly what was going on. The Hebrew literally means 'making the ephah small and the shekel heavy.' The ephah was the standard unit of volume with which you measured out the grain you were selling and the shekel was the

standard unit of weight by which you weighed out the silver you got in payment. So Amos is saying that these men gave small measure for inflated prices.

Almost certainly they regarded sharp practice like that as perfectly legitimate. 'Everybody does it,' they were saying, just like the secondhand-car dealer who turns back the milage on the milometer, or the shopkeeper when he (accidentally) gives you short change. 'Business is business.' With surer moral insight Amos perceives that what is really true of these people is that business is coming before people.

Business before people

'Buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat' (8:6). A pair of sandals might just be a petty debt, but I think it is more likely that it refers to some deal involving land for which in ancient Israel an exchanged sandal sometimes served as a form of contract (see Ru. 4:7). Amos is saying that a peasant farmer in this society could be callously sold into slavery by these big business tycoons all for the sake of an unpaid bill or an overdue rent. Their unscrupulousness went so far that they would even adulterate good grain with inedible chaff to increase their profits.

Here, then, is a picture of outrageous social injustice. Anybody with any moral conscience would be incensed by what was going on. But, whereas humanism could only wax indignant, Amos can do something more: he can tell us 'who says so'.

'I will never forget'

'The Lord has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget anything they have done" ' (8:7). Amos has not abandoned the categories of 'God' and 'Immortality', with the result that his ethics are reinforced not just by moral

feeling but by moral authority. Notice the ironic oath. One swears on something one takes to be immoveable. In 4:2 the Lord swears by his holiness, something that can never change. Here we read that he swears by the Pride of Jacob – because, as far as God is concerned, Israel's arrogance is now as obdurate and as unshakeable as anything in the universe.

We can be sure, then, that the evil perpetuated in this world does not merely pass into the oblivion of past history. Our moral indignation is not empty cant; it corresponds to something which God himself feels: 'I will never forget anything they have done.' The deeds of these exploiters and oppressors are recorded indelibly in the memory of one who is far more concerned about social injustice than any of us, and one day the books will be opened. The deeds of rich and poor, small and great, will be told. No-one then will be found demanding, 'Who says so?' They will know. 'The Lord has sworn, "I will never forget anything they have done." ' Can our ethics survive without authority like that behind them?

'What happens if I don't?'

Amos goes further; not only can he tell us who says so, he has a sanction too. 'This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. "What do you see, Amos?" he asked. "A basket of ripe fruit," I answered. Then the Lord said to me, "The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer" ' (8:1–2).

There is a pun in the original Hebrew that is cleverly translated here. Literally the original speaks of 'a basket of summer fruit', and the phrase rendered 'the time is ripe' is actually 'the end has come'. In the original Hebrew the word for 'summer fruit' is very similar in sound to the word for 'the end'. As the pun cannot be translated the NIV uses the linking-word 'ripe' to convey the force of the

pun at the small expense of diverging slightly from the literal meaning of the original.

The end

Amos's original hearers, however, did not need any subtle explanations like that. His point was unmistakable. Israel had been cultivating injustice for years and now she was going to reap the harvest of it. It was, he says, the end.

The problem for the humanist is that he has no 'end' to appeal to, and therefore no comfort for the oppressed or any warning for the oppressor. All he can do is try to persuade with rationalistic argument and hope he convinces. Amos suffers no such handicap. Having not abandoned 'God' and 'Immortality', he can wax eloquent on the *fate* of the wicked as well as on their wickedness. The end will come, and what a bitter end it is going to be.

Carnage

' "In that day," declares the Sovereign Lord, "the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies – flung everywhere! Silence!" ' (8:3).

Perhaps Amos is near the temple as he sees this vision and is listening to the harmony of the Hebrew psalms being sung there. In his imagination they seem to disintegrate, even while he is listening to them, into the plaintive lamenting of countless Jewish funeral mourners. He looks around the streets buzzing with people going to the harvest festival. They seem suddenly to be full of dead bodies, tossed from the doors and balconies with no words of blessing or hope. Over it all there is an eerie, deafening silence. The end will come.

National chaos

'Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn? The whole land will rise like the Nile; it will be stirred up and then sink like the river of Egypt' (8:8).

Here Amos is describing the end in terms of an earthquake, a natural phenomenon that casts dread into the hearts of Middle Eastern people. He might be intending it literally, or, perhaps more probably, he is speaking metaphorically of the social upheaval and confusion which the end will bring. 'Your whole world is going to fall into disorder. It is as if the very earth is revolted by the injustices you are committing on it, and will retch with moral nausea.' Whether we agree with his morality or not, the prophet insists that we cannot escape its claim upon us. What a person sows he will reap. The end will come.

Divine retribution

'I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your religious feasts into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day' (8:9–10).

Notice the ominous repetition: 'I will', 'I will', 'I will,' 'I will'. God is not a passive observer of social injustice. He is not just a distant, remote moral authority that we appeal to for the sake of our philosophy. He is active in judgment. He personally intervenes. His moral authority is reinforced by moral sanctions.

Once again Amos uses the metaphor of a rare natural phenomenon to communicate the awesomeness of his message. This time it is a solar eclipse, the sun 'going down' at noon and darkening the earth in broad daylight, something which I suppose many of these Jews had heard about in their folklore but never experienced and which had an almost mythological terror for them. Just as they are thrown into panic by the mere thought of such an omen of doom, so it will be when the end comes. The smug social gatherings at church in which they engage will suddenly take on the nature of a revivalist prayer meeting.

There is deep pathos in verse 10, for again and again in this prophecy God has been saying through Amos, 'Seek me and live.'

'Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph' (5:14–15).

God wanted less religious performance and more broken hearts. He wanted less concern for prosperity and more concern for justice. He has been saying that repeatedly through his prophet. But now Amos sees that in the very midst of judgment, at last some measure of remorse will dawn on this people. Their religious feasts will turn into fasting. Their joyful songs will turn into tears of lamentation. Sackcloth and baldness are signs of deep contrition. Everybody will be expressing grief like that on the last day. But the tragedy is that it would come too late. For, says Amos, probation is over. The day of salvation is past. It is the end.

Jesus said that hell would be characterized by weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 13:42). What a sobering thought, to be, like Faustus, beyond mercy, to be left with the frustration of remembering how different things could have been if only we had faced up in time to the eternal consequences of our lifestyle! To be left sighing, 'Oh! If only!' as we consider the might-have-beens of our lives.

' "The days are coming," declares the Sovereign Lord, "when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it" ' (8:11–12).

What an irony! These people had been stopping their ears to Amos's words probably for years. And Amos was not the only one. God had sent them prophets constantly

and they had rejected them. When the end comes, says Amos, when judgment at last arrives, they will be looking round in frantic haste in all directions to find those very prophets whom they had so often ignored. But it will be too late. They will be gone.

Notice that it is the young that Amos singles out as those who will perhaps feel this thirst for God's word most acutely.

'The lovely young women and strong young men will faint because of thirst. They who swear by the shame of Samaria, or say, "As surely as your god lives, O Dan,' or, "As surely as the god of Beersheba lives" . . . (8:13–14).'

It is always so. When the world begins to tumble about our ears and we begin to perceive that the end is upon us, it is always the young who react the most quickly. They are the ones who will be soonest on the streets protesting, waving their placards, shouting their slogans, who will flock to every upstart preacher or campaigner with some new message, thirsty for answers. So long as God continues to extend the grace of his word to a nation, the young are its hope. Though everybody's eyes are blinded by materialistic self-interest, young eyes may perceive through that dazzle where the real moral issues lie.

When the end comes, however, even the spiritual vision of the young fails. For all the energy of their youthful quest, Amos says, they can only find 'the shame of Samaria', or the images of Dan and Beersheeba, pagan cults which exploit their spiritual thirst but are incapable of truly satisfying it. Even for the young in that day, it is the end. 'They will fall never to rise again' (8:14).

God's social concern and us

Taking sin seriously

Perhaps having read this far you are a little tired of the remorselessness with which Amos keeps on describing such

harrowing scenes. He presents a very solemn picture here, but for an important reason. Moral values for him were not mere inventions of humanist philosophy. They were decreed by a divine authority and were going to be enforced by divine sanctions. Social concern was not a bee in Amos's private bonnet, but a passion in the heart of God himself. To put it bluntly, Amos took sin seriously. So dreadfully seriously did he take it that he found it hard to find words strong enough to express his concern.

We have to ask ourselves if we take it seriously, too. Increasingly today, I am afraid people do not. Hard as the likes of George Eliot may try to retain the idea of moral responsibility in a secular world, the fact is that if you have no answer to the questions 'Who says so?' and 'What happens if I don't?', it is inevitable that moral standards are going to decline. That is why they have been steadily declining in our society for a century or more. Humanism is fighting a losing battle. Abandon 'God' and 'Immortality', and 'Duty' becomes just a ghost, the image of which grows fainter with every generation that passes. That is why more and more people in our day are adopting a fundamentally anarchistic moral attitude. There are no rules except the ones you make up for yourself, they say, so do your own thing.

An allegory

Sometimes I think about a story that I would like to write one day. It has a very simple plot. It all takes place on a liner on which an international humanist conference is taking place. The liner is shipwrecked, and all the humanist professors finish up in one small boat with limited food. They begin to debate which of them should jump overboard for the sake of the survival of the others. There is a Utilitarian there who reads a lot of Bentham, and he declares, 'Forty-nine per cent of us should jump over. That would lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest

number.' There is an evolutionist there who has read all of Huxley, and he argues, 'The oldest ones should jump; that would mean the survival of the fittest.' There is a Marxist there with a red tie and a black beard, and he says, 'I think all the filthy capitalists should jump over. Long live the revolution!' And so the debate proceeds.

All this time the ship's captain, who is the only non-philosopher aboard, has been sitting in the bow of the lifeboat quietly fingering a boat-hook and reading his well-thumbed copy of *Playboy* magazine. There he learns that the only rule is 'Enjoy yourself'. Pursue your own pleasure, says Hugh Hefner; people are just playthings. 'What a good idea!' says the captain. So, with a few deft flicks of his strong mariner's wrist, all the philosophers go into the ocean and he is left in the boat on his own. 'I *did* enjoy that!' he says.

What comeback have the others got as they splutter in the sea? 'Jolly unreasonable behaviour!' 'I question the expediency of that.' Yet if all ethics are based on human value-judgment about reasonableness and expediency, they are wide open to the 'might is right' law of the jungle. The philosopher Nietzsche spoke truly when he said that if you toss out God and immortality, the only thing that is left is 'strength'.

If present trends continue, our society is going to become more and more callous and ruthless. Only one thing will stop that slide. We must rediscover 'God' and 'Immortality'. People do matter, social justice matters, because somebody said so. That somebody has the power to enforce his moral authority and intends to do so. 'The time is ripe,' he says. 'I will spare them no longer.'

Three points to ponder

A lesson for the churchgoer

'When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain?' I can think of no simpler test of someone's spirituality than the degree to which he gives God his attention. Some of us never enter into satisfying depths of worship because we are too busy. Our minds are fluttering on a thousand things we are going to do: the business trip to be undertaken, the money to be made, the job to be found. We cannot put those things out of our minds. All the time we are in church we are mulling them over. Indeed, that is why some people never find the light of the gospel at all. They hear the gospel and feel some deep-down intuition that it is relevant to them, but somehow it never clicks. The apostle Paul says of such, 'The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ' (2 Cor. 4:4). What will they do when the end comes?

A lesson for business people

'Honesty is the best policy,' runs the old adage. It is true. But we had better face the fact that in a secularist society that has forgotten God's values, it may be rather hard to believe that honesty is the best policy. Those who are prepared to cheat may well make bigger profits than we do. Those who are prepared to bribe may win more tenders, and those who are prepared to lie will probably earn quicker promotion. If one's only criteria of success in business are profit and promotion, then one will be reduced to dishonesty and corruption in no time at all. It is only when we see our lives in the light of the 'end' that honesty becomes the best policy.

A lesson for our nation

Amos predicts 'not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord'. We dare not say that it could not happen here, for there are nations in our world today where it is true, where people go hundreds of miles to hear a sermon, or where they pay a month's wages to own a tiny portion of the Bible. That is how desperate they are for spiritual food. We cannot say that it could not happen to our nation. We cannot say that the churches could not be closed and turned into warehouses. We cannot say that the Bible could not be banned, or that preachers could not be shut up in prison. It happens. Maybe it is a mark of the end.

10

GOD'S PURPOSE IN JUDGMENT
Amos 9:1–15

One of the things I miss from my London childhood is what we used to call the rag-and-bone man. In east London there were hundreds of them. Our local man was called Mr Brett. Everybody knew his cart, and the rather scraggy ginger horse that used to pull it, and his chant, which he used to emit every few yards as he drove along the road. It was totally unintelligible, yet unmistakably his own. My mother used to interpret it to me as 'Old iron and lumber'. Whether that was right or not, I do not know, but it was certainly what he collected. Never had you seen as much rubbish as he had stacked in his yard. As boys, we used to go round to look at it just out of curiosity. Sometimes he would even come over and talk to us, which is how I discovered exactly how he made his living.

One day he was ripping apart old gas water-heaters, or something like that, and he pointed to the pile of components that he had extracted from the bowels of these decrepit things. 'Know what that is?' he whispered confidentialy. 'Copper. I'll get a few quid for that.'

Another day he came to us, very pleased with himself, his brawny hand clasped tight on some little object. 'What do you think I've got here?' he gloated. It was a small piece of jewellery he had found in the springs of an old armchair he was taking to pieces.

It was insights like these that imparted the romance we boys attributed to what was really appalling dereliction. As far as we were concerned his yard was the nearest thing in our experience to Treasure Island. What to other people was valueless junk was to him a goldmine to be scoured in search of precious things – which is no doubt why he dignified his business with the title 'W. Brett and Co., Salvage'.

'Salvage' is very much the theme of the closing chapter of Amos. Repeatedly he has reiterated the disaster which he foresees as engulfing affluent Israel, and there have been few if any chinks of light through the gloom. It seems as though, in God's estimation at least, Israel is no more than a load of old junk to be disposed of.

Yet in these closing verses of the book Amos strikes a new and vitally significant note. Israel, it seems, was not being sent to the rubbish dump after all, but to the salvage yard. God had not given up on her. Like old Mr Brett, he could see gold glinting yet among the debris of her decadence, and he intended to recover it.

Even in the harrowing retribution he was about to inflict upon her, he had a plan. He had a purpose of salvation in the midst of judgment. The hope and consolation that we can find as we read about that purpose come from realizing that that purpose has not changed, even today.

No refuge

The chapter divides into two halves around verse 8. The first half is very much in keeping with the depressing tone which has been characteristic of the book.

'I saw the Lord standing by the altar, and he said: "Smash the tops of the pillars so that the thresholds shake" ' (9:1).

You will remember that there is considerable evidence that much of Amos's prophecy, if not all of it, was

delivered at Bethel, the religious centre of Israel in those days. Many scholars go further than that. They believe that the last two chapters of Amos are actually set in Bethel at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, what we would call today the Harvest Thanksgiving. Certainly in chapter 8 there are references to selling grain, that would make very good sense at that time of the year. It would also add relevance to the vision of ripe summer fruit that we were considering in the previous chapter. We cannot be sure about this, but if that speculation is correct it does add a startling extra dimension to the visionary experience with which chapter 9 begins – we know from 1 Kings 13:1 that it was the practice of the king of Israel to take part in the Feast of Tabernacles personally by standing beside the altar.

Are we to imagine, then, that Amos is here at the Bethel shrine mingling with the pilgrims as they offer their harvest gifts, and that he sees King Jeroboam II seeking as ever to bolster the legitimacy of his reign and to add to his political prestige, taking his place by the altar, presiding over the people's worship? Suddenly, as he looks, reality dissolves into prophetic vision, and it is not Jeroboam whom he sees but a different king – the real King. 'I saw the Lord standing by the altar.'

No protection in their cathedral

That is the scenario that Alec Moyter suggests in his exposition *The Message of Amos*, and I find it an exciting possibility. What we can be sure about is that religious complacency had been the besetting sin of which Amos has complained incessantly, and now, at the climax of his ministry, he perceives in clearer terms than at any time previously how determined God was to eliminate it. Destruction was on the way, and there was going to be no protection even in their cathedral.

'Smash the tops of the pillars so that the thresholds shake.' God himself had come to their temple, not to bless it, but to demolish it. In the vision that Amos sees, supernatural hammer blows rain down on the capstones of the temple columns and transmit the impulse all the way down their length so that the very foundation slabs splinter and crack under the impact. As the roof topples in, people are decapitated by the falling masonry. It is a dreadful scene: the crowded temple dissolves before his eyes into a massacre. The sanctuary has become a slaughter house. There is no safety in their church or anywhere else.

No safety in flight

'Not one will get away, none will escape. Though they dig down to the depths of the grave, from there my hand will take them. Though they climb up to the heavens, from there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, there I will hunt them down and seize them. Though they hide from me at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent to bite them. Though they are driven into exile by their enemies, there I will command the sword to slay them' (9:1–4).

There is a famous text in the New Testament which says, 'Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:39). It is a marvellously comforting promise, but Amos would have us know that it has a more macabre corollary: neither height nor depth, or anything in all creation, will be able to hide us from the wrath of God, either. No matter how deep they dig, no matter how high they climb, no matter how far they run, they shall not escape. There is no refuge, for, unlike the petty tyrant Jeroboam, who loves to dress up and play king, the Lord rules the whole world. Even the sea monster lurking in the ocean obeys his sovereign

command. Even pagan armies marching on some distant field fulfil his sovereign will. Inexorably and inescapably God's retribution will pursue them. Like the sensing device on a heat-seeking missile, God fixes his eyes upon them, and there will be no evading their glare.

At this point, as if to add an ironic confirmation to his words, Amos bursts into song. Although this is not clear in translation, verses 5 and 6 are probably an echo of the hymn which Amos has quoted more than once during this prophecy. When we came across it in chapter 4 and again in the middle of chapter 5, we suggested that he might be quoting a psalm that was being sung by the Bethel temple choir. Perhaps he could actually hear it going on in the background as he was preaching. If we are right to think of this vision as taking place actually during the course of worship on a major national feast day, then it is far from unlikely that that choir was singing the same psalm again.

'The Lord, the Lord Almighty, he who touches the earth and it melts, and all who live in it mourn – the whole land rises like the Nile, then sinks like the river of Egypt – he who builds his lofty palace in the heavens and sets its foundation on the earth, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land – the Lord is his name' (9:5–6).

It is as if Amos is asking the congregation, 'How can you describe the Lord in these awe-inspired terms in your hymnology and yet entertain the ridiculous hope of eluding his judgment in your theology? That is impossible! There is no protection in your religion. There is no safety in flight; not from such a God as this, no matter who you are!'

No immunity in privilege

' "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?" declares the Lord. "Did I not bring Israel up from Eygpt,

the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" ' (9:7).

This is an extraordinary statement, one that is in a sense unparalleled in the Old Testament. Yet it is important that we should not exaggerate what Amos is saying. He cannot be suggesting that Israel is in no sense special to God. He cannot mean that, for, if that were his meaning, he would be blatantly contradicting what he had said back in chapter 3. There God says of Israel: 'You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth' (3:2). Amos is as clear as any Old Testament writer that Israel had a unique relationship to God. She was his chosen people; and to suggest, as some do, that Amos is repudiating that doctrine of election, is to go far beyond what the text warrants.

Nevertheless, it is a remarkable text. Amos is saying in the strongest and most offensive terms he could devise that the Lord is no patron deity to Israel. His influence is not limited to her borders, nor is he pledged to be always on her side like a mascot. No, he says, Israel is not the only nation whose affairs the Lord governs. She has no monopoly on his providential care. 'You boast, you Israelites, that the Lord delivered you from Egypt. Do you think he was uninvolved in the migration of the Philistines from Crete or the migration of the Syrians from Mesopotamia? You boast that you are descended from Abraham and that you occupy the promised land. Do you think, then, that God has no concern or interest in those dark-skinned descendants of Cush who live in Sudan and Ethiopia? Nonsense. The Lord is no chauvinist.'

It is true that Israel was privileged. While other nations were directed unconsciously by divine providence, Israel was made aware of the Lord's government of her history by means of a divine revelation. Yet that privilege does not immunize her from judgment. It makes her all the more vulnerable to it. For, as Moses and all the prophets never tired of saying, the condition of her national blessing was

not privilege, but obedience. Indeed, that is true for everyone.

'Surely the eyes of the Sovereign Lord are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth' (9:8). Notice that definite article, '*the* sinful kingdom'. I am sure that what Amos is implying there – whether it be the Cushite kingdom, the Philistine, the Aramean, or the Israelite – *the* sinful kingdom is a kingdom that God opposes. The eyes of this universal King scour the whole earth and punish injustice wherever he sees it.

John the Baptist would say later to the Jews of his day: 'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.' (Mt. 3:8–9). The true mark of election is moral, not racial.

So there is no protection in their church, no safety in their flight, and no immunity in their privilege. In short, there is no refuge. No-one will get away, says Amos. No-one will escape.

But then comes the surprise. It seemed as though God had total annihilation in mind. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, Amos catches sight of the 'salvage yard'.

Saved

' "Surely the eyes of the Sovereign Lord are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth – yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob," declares the Lord' (9:8).

If verse 7 is unique in the severity with which the prophet scolds Israel, verse 8 must surely be equally unique in the abruptness of its change of mood.

Critical scholars, perhaps rather predictably, insist that the chapter as it stands is self-contradictory. They suggest that verse 8 must have been adapted by some later editor

and that what follows from verse 9 onwards is a postscript appended by somebody other than Amos, writing perhaps a couple of hundred years after him. Yet it is not necessary to accept that sceptical verdict, for many of the prophets, wrestling with their morbid premonitions of doom for Israel, are inspired by God's Spirit to see beyond the darkness of the immediate future to discover a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

Jeremiah is a classic example of this. For forty years he preached a message of unrelieved gloom and despondency. Only when the national disaster he had been depicting was at last on the very brink of fulfilment does he suddenly change his tune and start speaking about long-term hope on the other side of the nation's short-term despair (Je. 29:10–14). Isaiah and Micah, prophets who were almost contemporary with Amos, showed the same Messianic expectation filtering through their premonitions of judgment (see, *e.g.*, Is. 25–26; Mi. 4). Amos is only following the pattern. In fact there is nothing in these last chapters which is not anticipated in the book of Deuteronomy (*e.g.* Dt. 30:1–10).

It is true that the introduction of this new word of hope is extraordinarily sudden. It may be that the second half of this chapter was added later and did not form part of the visionary experience in the temple. It may even be that it was added after the prophet had gone home to Judah and had opportunity to reflect more deeply on his own prophetic experiences and to record them in writing. But I see no reason at all why these verses should not have been written by Amos himself or why they must be interpreted as contradicting everything that has gone before.

The question Amos is trying to resolve here is quite simple. Given that the most appalling catastrophe is about to engulf Israel, has the purpose of God failed simply because human beings have failed? And the emphatic

answer that Amos gives to that is 'No'. 'I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob' (9:8).

Selective judgment

It is as if Amos has read through his book and anticipates that someone is going to think that Israel is finished. So he adds this postscript in order to make absolutely clear that that is not what he is saying. God has a purpose in judging Israel and that purpose is not annihilation but salvage.

He clarifies that in this second half of the chapter in two ways. The first is by showing us very clearly that the judgment that is about to fall will be selective. 'For I will give the command, and I will shake the house of Israel among all the nations as corn is shaken in a sieve, but not an ear will fall to the ground' (9:9).

A pedantic reader might insist that this is not consistent with what was said back in verse 1. He said then that no-one would escape. Now he is talking about sieves. The answer to that has to be to look more carefully at what Amos is getting at back in verse 1. There he is not actually saying that every Israelite would be exterminated. It is all those who are identified with the corrupt Bethel-centred national religion who will be purged.

Throughout his prophecy Amos has in fact been attacking only a certain element within Israelite society, namely the exploiting and the oppressing ruling classes. But, in passing, he has often mentioned another group. This group he sometimes calls 'the poor', 'the needy', even 'the righteous'; the very people, in other words, who were the victims of the oppression and the exploitation of the rich and powerful. Implicit throughout the prophecy has been the question, 'What about them? Are they included in this ban that is symbolized by the collapse of Bethel?' Amos here perceives that they are not. Jeroboam's

kingdom will be destroyed, but not the entire population. God's judgment is selective.

In fact there is nothing new in that thought. It was already present in chapter 7. We saw there in Amos's visions, first of a locust swarm and then of a fiery holocaust, something which threatened to destroy the entire country, with all the people. Each time, God said, 'This will not happen' (7:3, 6). Then, in the third vision, we noted that Amos saw a different kind of threat, a plumb-line set up against a wall, an instrument not of indiscriminate destruction but of evaluation. 'I am setting a plumb-line among my people' (7:8).

Evidently it is the same thought here, but with an even clearer image, not a plumb-line any more, but a sieve. Judgment will be selective, he says, separating the nation out, distinguishing the whole grain from the inedible chaff, or the fertile soil from the unproductive pebbles. Only the sinners will perish. The godly will be dispersed amongst the nations, but they will be salvaged from the rest. 'For I will give the command, and I will shake the house of Israel among all the nations as corn is shaken in a sieve, but not an ear will fall to the ground. All the sinners among my people will die by the sword, all those who say, "Disaster will not overtake or meet us" ' (9:9–10).

Amos is perceiving that though God does judge nations as corporate wholes, and every one of us suffers the consequences of that, in the final analysis it will be as individuals that we are assessed, not as societies. As Ezekiel was later to point out, 'The soul who sins is the one who will die' (Ezk. 18:20). Though there may be all kinds of injustice proliferating on earth, though innocent suffering may be all too obvious a scandal, ultimately people will perish for their own sins and for nobody else's.

God intends to salvage everything he can from this fallen world.

Judgment that is a new beginning

The second way in which Amos clarifies for us God's purpose in judgment is to show that judgment itself will be but the prelude to a new society: 'In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name' (9:11–12).

Although some scholars insist that Amos believed Israel was finished, in the light of the whole of the Old Testament such a proposition is inconceivable. One word that sums up why that notion is unimaginable is the word 'covenant'. A covenant involves a promise, and, according to the Old Testament, God promised Israel a future of blessing. In fact he made that promise on three different major occasions.

He made it first of all to Abraham when he promised to bless Abraham's descendants and ultimately through them to bring blessing on all the nations of the world (Gn. 12:2–3; 17:3–7). The second time was through Moses when God gave his people his law and promised them special blessing if they kept it (Dt. 28:1–14). The third occasion was through David when God guaranteed the continuance of the kingdom and promised that an heir of David would always occupy its throne (2 Sa. 7:8–16).

The optimism of these closing verses of Amos simply reflects Amos's confidence that God would keep these promises. No matter what national disasters might intervene in the short term, out of the ruins of the past, reconstruction must come: the covenant guarantees it.

A new kingdom

'I will restore David's fallen tent' (9:11). A new day must dawn on the other side of this judgment, a new day with

a new kingdom – not like the tattered wreck of a monarchy that prevailed in Amos's day, with the nation divided and hopelessly weakened. When the refining work of God's judgment had achieved its full effect, a new flowering of that promise to David's line would be possible: a new king, a new kingdom.

A new prosperity

More than that, the new day would also bring a new prosperity: ' "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when the reaper will be overtaken by the ploughman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. I will bring back my exiled people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit" ' (9:13–14).

These words take their inspiration from the book of Deuteronomy. Moses had told the people of Israel that the economic blessings of the covenant were conditional upon their obedience to God's law. If they disobeyed it then the blessing would be forfeit. They would suffer famine and disease; their enemies would seize their produce and lay siege to their cities. Eventually they would be taken into exile. All that was there in the covenant, but Moses also anticipated that though the blessings might be forfeited in that way, the covenant itself never could be abrogated. Eventually, judgment would work repentance (Dt. 28:15–68; 30:1–10).

Look at Deuteronomy 30:1–3 in particular: 'When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to

everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.'

The Hebrew expression translated 'restore your fortunes' is precisely the phrase rendered in Amos 9:14 as 'bring back my exiled people'. 'The milk and honey will flow again then,' says Amos. Security and peace will be enjoyed again, but this time nothing will threaten its continuance: ' "I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them," says the Lord your God' (9:15).

How and when?

The question we inevitably want to ask when we are faced with prophecies like this is how and when they were or will be fulfilled. Not all Christians would agree on the answer.

Some would see the fulfilment of these words in the return from exile which occurred in the later part of the sixth century BC when Cyrus of Persia permitted a contingent of Jews to go back to Jerusalem and repopulate their homeland. Others might see significance in the restoration of Israel in our own century in Palestine. Yet neither of those historical events seems to me to bear the faintest resemblance to the idealized vision that Amos is giving us.

Others would argue that the fulfilment of this vision is still in the future in some millennial Utopia when the people of God will enjoy unparalleled prosperity and political influence.

What is absolutely beyond question is that the early Christians were in no doubt about when this prophecy found its fulfilment. In the account of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, summarizes its proceedings: 'When they had

finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord who does these things' " ' (Acts 15:13–17).

James is quoting from the Greek (Septuagint) version of Amos 9. He sees this prophecy as fulfilled not in some territorial hope for Israel, either past or future. For him it is in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ that the tent of David has been rebuilt. For him it is in the new Israel of the church that this new age of which the prophet Amos speaks has begun. For him it is the conversion of the Gentiles and their incorporation into the church which Amos is anticipating when he speaks of Israel possessing 'all the nations that bear my name' (9:12).

This has huge implications. It means that *we* are involved in Amos 9. We are not spectators of God's purpose in judgment; we are caught up in it. It is about us. We are there in the sieve, on one side or the other of the mesh. God's plan to salvage a kingdom with a new prosperity out of the ruins of Old Testament religion is not some dream with which Amos is entertaining himself. According to the apostles of Jesus Christ, it is a reality. It has happened. It is here, and that means two very important practical things for us.

Consolation

Notice Amos's repeated use of the first person, referring to God, in verses 11 to 15. '*I will* restore David's fallen tent. *I will* repair its broken places . . . *I will* bring back *my* exiled people . . . *I will* plant Israel in their own land.'

We have seen that this is characteristic of Amos. The repeated 'I will's' which we observed in 8:9–10 are splendid examples: '*I will* make the sun go down at noon . . . *I will* turn your religious feasts into mourning . . . *I will* make all of you wear sackcloth' and so on. Yet, whereas in the past it has always been in the context of judgment, here at last the 'I will' of God's sovereign purpose is pledged in a different direction. It is pledged for salvation not judgment.

Every believer needs to take great strength and comfort from that, because we live, as Amos lived, in days of great political and economic danger. Materialism has anaesthetized our Western culture to those moral issues upon which its destiny depends. If it be true that the eyes of the Lord are on the sinful kingdom to destroy it from the face of the earth and that we cannot evade them, then we have cause to worry. For the values of our Christian heritage are sliding away from us. There is nothing in our civilization that immunizes us against judgment any more than there was in Israel. Our affluence is precarious. It will take more than budget-day speeches to secure it.

Perhaps the tide will turn. Perhaps our economic prosperity and our political independence will be preserved to us. Perhaps not. It is a brave person who would bet money on what the situation in the West will be at the turn of the century. But the consolation for the Christian is that ultimately it does not matter. Whatever disaster may befall our country or our world in the next twenty years, ultimately it does not matter, because the centre of God's purpose is not anchored in any nation or in Western civilization. It is anchored in the church of Jesus Christ. God still has his people, wheat growing among the tares, and not an ear of that precious grain will fall to the ground.

Augustine the theologian lived through one of the most momentous political crises of all history, the fall of the city of Rome. He saw the civilization which for many people had represented all the stability, security, and prosperity

to be had in the world overrun by barbarian hordes. He saw the world plunged into cultural and intellectual darkness from which it would not recover for centuries. Yet Augustine, man of great sophistication though he was, did not despair. 'There will be an end of every earthly city,' he wrote. 'It is only the city of God that remains.'

If we are going to be proof against disillusionment and despair at the end of our twentieth century, we had better make sure that we have learned, like Amos, where the ultimate future lies. Says the writer to the Hebrews, 'Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful . . . for our God is a consuming fire' (Heb. 12:28–29).

A very solemn warning

There is a message of very solemn but very real consolation in what Amos is telling us at the close of his prophecy. But if there is a message of consolation, there is also a very solemn warning: 'All the sinners among my people will die by the sword, all those who say, "Disaster will not overtake or meet us" ' (9:10).

God's new world lies on the other side of judgment. There is no way we can circumvent that judgment, no way we can enter into that new world till we have passed through the sieve. Notice that Amos does not say that all sinners without qualification will die by the sword. If he had said that, there would not be hope for anybody. It is those sinners who say, "Disaster will not overtake or meet us,' who are sifted out by the sieve of judgment.

Amos is telling us again that it is complacency that we must fear more than anything, the complacency that thinks that because it worships in a sacred building it is going to be protected, or because it possesses some privilege of birth it will be immune, which thinks that somehow somewhere there will be a place to hide when judgment comes. No,

Amos does not contradict what he has been saying before: everybody goes through the sieve . . . including us.

The root trouble with the Israelites to whom Amos spoke was not that their society was unjust and exploitative, but that when God told them that was how things were and what he intended to do about it, they would not believe his warning or repent of their actions. So Amos is telling us we are not finally condemned for those particular sins we have committed; we are condemned for the ultimate sin of thinking that we can get away with them, when we cannot. 'All those who say, "Disaster will not overtake or meet us," ' they are the ones who will perish.

Can you imagine somebody going to a restaurant and ordering a meal, the wine, the sweet, the cheese, the liqueurs, and then saying when the waiter brings the bill, 'Oh dear, I wasn't expecting that!'? Amos says that it is just such folly which people who are perishing are engaged in. They go on living as they please, without a care for the consequences. Amos says, 'Not one will get away, none will escape' (9:1).

Listen to these words of Jesus himself: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep upon his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." . . . Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" ' (Mt. 25:31–34, 41).

If we don't like that picture, we have to argue with Jesus. It is the sieve.

EPILOGUE

AMOS, HELL AND JESUS

'The lion has roared – who will not fear?' (3:8).

Do you ever feel afraid when you read your Bible? I know I do, especially when I read a book such as Amos. It cannot have escaped your attention how much of the prophet's message is taken up with the prospect of divine judgment. Some will, no doubt, want to dismiss such an alarming subject as 'primitive' or 'sub-Christian'. I cannot end without affirming that I am convinced it is neither.

Amos is a book for realists. It treats us like adults and refuses to comfort us with sentimental fairy stories ending 'They all lived happily ever after'. Amos knew the real ending of this world was not going to be like that. What is more, Jesus knew it too.

Jesus told a story once about a rich man who, like many in affluent eighth-century Israel, gave no thought to God or to the poor, or indeed to anybody except himself. When he died he went to hell. I wish I could tell you that hell is no more than an empty threat on God's part, but Jesus in his story does not say that. When the rich man was in hell, Jesus tells us, he cried out for mercy. But just as in the case of impenitent Israel, it was too late. God's patience was exhausted. The opportunity for salvation had passed. The rich man even asked if some heavenly ambassador could be sent to his brothers who were still alive. He felt

sure that a suitable apparition would work repentance in their Scrooge-like hearts. But the answer he got was, 'They have a Bible, let them read it' (see Lk. 16:19–31).

That is the advice Jesus gives us, then, if we are worried about judgment to come. He believed it was possible to escape hell, but he never endorsed the spurious comfort of those who deny its existence. Such people live in a fools' paradise.

A student said to me once: '*My* God would never send anyone to hell!' No, of course he wouldn't! That student's God's would never have said boo to a goose. He was nothing but a spiritual teddy bear, a plaything, a fantasy that existed nowhere but in that student's imagination. Neither Jesus nor Amos had any interest in such hypothetical deities. They tell us about the real God, and he is a roaring lion, not a mewing kitten. He is a God who cares fervently about righteousness, a God who has destroyed worlds for the sake of that moral passion. Why should it be so unthinkable, then, that he could destroy us?

It would have amazed Amos to hear the way some people today complain of hell as if it were a huge theological problem. 'How can God allow it?' they demand. 'Such a place of punishment would surely be a source of eternal embarrassment to a loving God. Why, the mere thought of its existence would spoil heaven's bliss!' To Amos that would have seemed the most appallingly sentimental nonsense. He knew that it is the thought of tolerating sin, rather than of punishing it, which is the embarrassment to God. He is no more embarrassed about hell than he was embarrassed about the fall of Samaria. Judgment is not some dark skeleton in God's cupboard which nobody in heaven is allowed to mention. On the contrary God is glorified in judgment. Just as Amos invited pagan nations to view the end of Israel's prosperity, so God will invite the universe to view the end of the sinner's prosperity.

Such judgment would be inconsistent with the love of God only if it were embarked upon hastily or gladly. But as Amos has been at pains to show us, God's judgments are always delayed by extraordinary patience and reluctance. He has acted again and again in history and in individual lives to call people back to himself. He pours out blessings upon us in spite of our sin and gets no thanks in return. He chastens us through illness, accident and disaster, but sees no repentance as a result. He sends prophets such as Amos only to find their words ignored. Finally, as a last resort, he sends his own Son. 'They will respect my son' (Mt. 21:37). But men nail him to a cross of wood. And even on that cross he prays 'Forgive them' (Lk. 23:34).

Is this some vengeful monster of a God? No; his patience is remarkable. He does not want anyone to perish, but to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). It is we who are the callous ones. We care nothing for the pain which our sin gives to God. We can even look at the cross of Christ and refuse to change our ways.

When God sends people like that to hell, they deserve it. Indeed, their moral obstinacy seems to indicate that they want it. Every step they have taken away from God has been a voluntary move in the direction of hell. If we insist long enough that we don't want God interfering in our lives, in the end he will grant our wish. He will leave us alone . . . for ever.

There is a story about D. L. Moody, the evangelist. One day during a service he was being continually interrupted by a group of noisy hecklers. He allowed them to continue for some time, but then he stood up to preach, and still the ribald interjections persisted. Suddenly his face turned grave and he rounded on his critics. 'You jeered at the hymns, and I said nothing. You jeered at the prayers, and I said nothing. But now you jeer at the Word of God. I would as soon jest with forked lightning.'

It is an immensely serious thing to read the Bible. For it tells us that God's patience, though immense, is not infinite. Just as with this book you are reading, the time must come when the final page will be turned, and then, staring at us, will be the inexorable words, The End. When that day comes we will plead in vain that we were not expecting it. For as in the case of the rich man's brothers in Jesus' story, the Bible has warned us of it, and nowhere more clearly than in the book of Amos.

God will punish our sins just as certainly as he punished Israel's, and according to the Bible there are only two places in the universe where he can do that. One is hell, where men and women experience for ever the divine indignation against their moral perversity. The other is the cross, where the Son of God absorbed within his own person, in one monstrous stroke of divine justice, that same divine indignation on our behalf. The choice is ours; the rubbish dump or the salvage yard.

The end

The West is on the verge of collapse created by its own hand . . . between good and evil there is an irreconcilable contradiction. One cannot build one's life without regard to this distinction . . .
Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Amos' message, believes Roy Clements, has a special relevance to the West at the end of the twentieth century. The prophet is addressing social evils in the nation, rebuking apostasy in the church, and challenging individuals to change direction in repentance.

Amos spoke vividly, with force and insistence, to an affluent society. Its people could not bring themselves to believe in divine judgment. Their religious leaders were reassuring – they told the people what they wanted to hear, and were outraged when Amos told them the opposite.

In his introduction, Sir Fred Catherwood writes that this is a message which 'our morally confused society badly needs if we are to emerge from the moral chaos which the false prophets have created, to avoid the disintegration of society and, above all, if each of us is to learn that "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom".'

'Roy Clements has a reputation as one of this country's foremost preachers'
Harvester

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