

*Always, only, ever Jesus*

<sup>7</sup> This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. <sup>8</sup> And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass by them; <sup>9</sup> the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

<sup>10</sup> Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. <sup>11</sup> For thus Amos has said, “‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’”

<sup>12</sup> And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, <sup>13</sup> but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

<sup>14</sup> Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. <sup>15</sup> But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ (Amos 7:7-15 ESV)

When reading the Old Testament with the advantage of history we know what happened next and we know the ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’. So if we have a book about Amos the prophet and in it we meet Amaziah the priest who is antagonistic towards Amos, tell me, without even knowing what the argument or issue is about, whose side are you drawn to be on? That’s right, Amos. Like in a pantomime we can easily imagine that whenever Amaziah is mentioned or speaks he should be accompanied by boos simply because he is against Amos.

Our first reading presents us with a not uncommon situation – even today – and that is who speaks for God? To whom should we listen if many speakers are saying ‘Thus says the Lord’? That might not be so difficult if the speakers are saying the same thing but what happens when they are saying opposite things?

Amos the prophet called out judgement on Jeroboam and the kingdom of Israel in the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Remember that after Solomon, the kingdom splits into a north and south each with their own kings and prophets speaking God’s message. Amaziah the priest and someone supporting the king and the kingdom speaks against Amos and even orders him back to the south, to the kingdom of Judah (his birthplace was close to Bethlehem) assuming that he is a professional or full-time prophet – someone from the prophet schools that were known exist. Amaziah takes the view that God supports the king and the kingdom will flourish because God is known among them.

Amos replies simply by saying – and is there an implication here that if Amaziah got this fact wrong maybe he’s wrong about other things as well? – that he (Amos) is not a son of a prophet; this prophecy business is not his through birth or schooling for he was a shepherd whom God simply told to go and speak.

A long time earlier God told his people through Moses that the only real proof about who is speaking God’s Word is when it either is or isn’t fulfilled. That’s the real test of who is speaking the truth. We know that the northern kingdom was taken over and scattered by the Assyrians in 722BC so we know that Amos was the true speaker.

But back then how could you tell? That’s not easy. And let me compound the problem further by saying what happens if one of the speakers is strange, weird, unestablishment, fringe, unorthodox, or saying a message that is seems ludicrous or is offensive? Such contexts increase the uncertainty – and we can appreciate a little how difficult some people finding religion these days with so many religions claiming the best path to truth and enlightenment (and a few claiming exclusivity along the way).

Amos challenged both king and priest by saying that they both would be destroyed. Try having even an academic conversation about the dissolution of the monarchy today in this country – and I’m not talking about destroying or killing family trees here – just whether the monarch is still necessary – and it can be met with

solid intransigence – the monarch must remain. Amos was talking about both palace and temple coming under judgement – not just a slap on the wrist – an OFSTED ‘must do better in future’ – but a destruction – and we can understand the resistance to listen.

It can be unpopular – even down right dangerous – to speak God’s Word for it is not always received with applause and thanks. Moses was challenged, Jeremiah was persecuted, Amos gets into fights, Hosea not only speaks his message but God tells him to live it out through his relationship with an unfaithful wife. Think of our gospel today and the account of the last prophet, John the Baptist – head on a platter for speaking God’s Word.

I can think of four people here in this church today (Steve, Jaime, Chaplain Mike Heuer [visiting today], and myself) who need to hear God clearly so that we can speak in God’s name clearly. And because we are Lutherans (!) this means that everything is grounded in God’s Word as revealed in Scripture – the Old and New Testaments – which are the only rule and norm for teachers of the Word and for the judging, assessing, weighing up of that Word. Ok, it’s not as glamorous maybe as direct revelation but we live in a different time – after Moses, after Amos, and after the Word made flesh came to live among us, died and rose again for us, and with the Father has sent the Holy Spirit so that we will remember what Jesus said and did and follow in his footsteps holding onto what the Holy Spirit has now given the church, the Bible. Our task is to speak God’s Word into the situation where the situation provides the context rather than determining the content; which means we might say things you’d like to hear and we might not – especially when it comes to judgements – difficult to do in a world where personal autonomy and ethics in a post modern almost anything goes landscape holds sway. Even in the church we don’t like such words spoken to us personally – and some people don’t even like them spoken generally as we do at the beginning of each service with the confession of sins which is our response to God’s Word and presence for our sin is exposed again and again. Yet Lutherans know that hearing God’s Word is hearing Law and Gospel; sin and grace; repentance and discipleship; joy and the cross. The message is Jesus, the voice and accent will come and go through the generations.

And if the four of us spoke 4 different messages what then? To whom do you listen? In Corinth they seem to have listen on the basis of personality or perceived power. It might be because you perceive one of us to have more status. Remember Paul had to defend his apostleship at times – a late comer he might have been but an apostle he still was. Again we can go back to Amos and Amaziah and listen to their messages. What are they saying? On what basis were they saying it? Was Amos making up God’s Word when he called people back to repentance and told them of God’s forthcoming judgements? His analysis would have been spot on. My feeling is that Amaziah would have been good on generalities – after all, he’s also saying God has said this and that – but he would be vague directly responding to Amos and I see this by the direct ordering him out back south which suggests (to me) his weak position. As I say to students, always check the basis for the messages and teachings you hear. Why? Because you want to hear Jesus and not my own opinions when it comes to hearing God’s Word for today.

This means that for us 21<sup>st</sup> century followers of Jesus, we are called again and again whether we are standing in a pulpit or sitting in a pew to be immersed in God’s Word for through it Jesus forms, shapes, guides, leads, challenges us in the life and discipleship he has given us. We have encouragement to worship regularly and to read, meditate, and pray daily.

And when we come to speak about the faith we have then the words which we will hear ourselves say with our own accents and phrasing – words about and from Jesus. Our words will reflect his cross and in that there will be tough words, hard words, and yet there will also be gracious words, forgiving words. We dare not say one without the other.

The world does not know to whom to listen. We can’t blame them for that is the entrapment and darkness of sin and death. We still speak of course and never stop but we also know that to get the world’s attention often actions speak as well. St Francis of Assisi once said, ‘Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words’. And so in a world where many religious words are accompanied by stridency, violence, and harshness let us find servant ways of proclaiming the cross and God’s love – not to minimise sin but to confront it – as well as presenting the only real help available – not ourselves (!) – but always, only, and ever Jesus.