

Homily on Amos 2:6-16

July 2, 2018

Intro: The English word prophecy ordinarily means to predict the future. In ancient Israel the word means to speak God's word, ordinarily God's view of the present. In Amos, the first of the writing prophets, it is ordinarily God's condemnation of the behavior of his people, who have covenanted with God to care for one another, and especially for the poor and oppressed.

Background: Israel as a nation had grown strong through international trade, and for the first time we see from archaeology of its cities the disparity between the palaces of the rich and the hovels of the poor. It is the cruel legal and economic practices which create this disparity that God is condemning in today's prophecy from Amos.

Amos: The 3 + 1 pattern is common in prophetic speech. God will not revoke God's commands to Israel to care for the poor and his promise of punishment for violation of his covenant. The crimes are not idolatry, but crimes against God's poor: The first crime is taking the poor to court for some small debt, the cost of a pair of used sandals, and selling them into slavery for money.

The second is not only grinding the poor into the ground, but disrespect for them in every way, including forcing them off the sidewalk. In a society in which honor and shame are central elements of life, this disrespect is the worst crime.

The third crime is that a father and son have intercourse with the same woman, either a prostitute, or even the son's wife. It's a violation of a covenant which mirrors our covenant with God.

Finally, the fourth crime is the greatest insult to God. In Jewish culture, a poor man's last recourse in paying off a debt is to give his coat as a pledge of repayment. But Dt tells Jews that they must return the coat at the end of the day, because this homeless man has no shelter against the cold except for his coat. Amos condemns the rich for not only not returning the coat but for laying on those garments while they toast each other with wine, and that God's own temple. It is the ultimate insult to God's love for the poor.

The Meaning for us:

What do you suppose Amos would say if he came to the United States today? If he saw the unprecedented gap between the rich and the poor, and taxes adjusted to take money from the public resources of the poor to give them to the super rich?

Saw the rich building McMansions of 5000 sq. ft. while the poor must be content with 24sq. ft., to say nothing of the millions sleeping in the streets and byways

Saw a million humans aborted from the womb, and children in schools gunned down by the crazies who have unlimited access to high capacity armaments?

Saw nursing infants ripped from mothers' breasts and quarantined at the border?

Saw a country whose appetite for drugs finances drug wars in Central American nations, and then refuses refuge to those trying desperately to escape this gang violence?

All of these, it seems to me, are the American equivalence of Israel's crimes which invited the Assyrians to annihilate the country in Amos' own lifetime.

We need to hear the prophet's voice as directed not only to Israel, but in the ongoing Word of God for us in America. We need conversion to God's way, ultimately to Christ's love of the poor and oppressed everywhere.

How do we do that? We don't. We open our hearts and minds to make not money, not power, not prestige, not pleasure, but God as the goal of our lives. Once we know God, we have everything that matters, and we stop squeezing others. That's why Amos' words are good news for us.