

Sermon for Holy Trinity Geneva on Sunday 13th October 2024 – the 20th Sunday after Trinity

Texts: Amos 5.6-7; Hebrews 4.12-16; Mark 10.17-31

Facing reality and turning to Christ

It's not always that we draw lessons from frogs but today I encourage you to do so.

Kosuke Koyama, a Japanese theologian, has a powerful image of the destiny of two different frogs which he describes in his book. '*Three Miles an Hour God*'. The first frog hops into boiling water and in shock, leaps out again quickly and survives. A second frog jumps into water which is heating slowly. Lulled by the warmth, the frog stays until it is too late to move and alas, it perishes.

Today we are challenged in all three passages of the Bible which we're heard and read today, to take a radical look at our lives before it is too late. So, we're going to look at these as our starting point before moving on to think about our own context today and how God is calling us to radical action.

The prophet Amos came from his home, just south of Jerusalem to bring God's message to the Northern kingdom of Israel in the mid eighth century BCE. He found himself in a deeply complacent and corrupt society. The Northern Kingdom was enjoying a rare period of peace as their surrounding neighbours were currently weakened by their own in-fighting, whilst the far more dangerous and powerful kingdom of Assyria was temporarily quiet, in a period of transition.

The Israelites are delighted, seeing this as a sign of Yahweh's favour and prepare to celebrate in worship, anticipating the great "Day of Yahweh" when God will give power and glory to his people as a mark of the special covenant (relationship) which he has with them.

But Amos sees a much grimmer reality before him. He sees their society as utterly corrupt. Outwardly, they are religious and make a great show of going to the Temple to worship yet it is quite cynical – solely for their own ends. Instead of living lives of holiness, kindness and generosity as God's chosen people, they are ruthlessly oppressing the poor, following mammon rather than God and blinding themselves to the reality of what they are doing. From the outside, their society may seem to be healthy and flourishing, yet within it is riddled with the cancer of corruption and oppression.

And Amos warns the people that the "Day of Yahweh" which they are so keen to celebrate, will, rather than being the day which affirms their nationalistic pride, will be the day when judgment falls on them for failing to live as God's people. Amos urges them to repent whilst there is time, but they ignore him. For a little while, nothing happened. But a few years after Amos' death, the Assyrians invaded the Northern Kingdom, forcing its inhabitants to flee and it was utterly destroyed.

Turning now to the Christian community which the author of the Book of Hebrews is addressing, we see a similar concern that they are living in a state of self-deception.

Outwardly, they are living together in the name of Christ, yet their hearts are hardening both towards God and each other. Like the frog gently cooking in the warm water, they are also convincing themselves that all is well.

And it is in this context, that the writer of Hebrews tells them to get real – to open their eyes to the reality of their situation. God is not fooled even if they fool themselves and others in their community. For the Word of God ‘is sharper than two-edged sword’ ; ‘it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart’. He warns them that God knows what is going on inside their hearts even if they won’t acknowledge it and if they continue in this way, it is going to lead to disaster. ‘For before him no creature is hidden but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account’ (*Hebrews 4.13*).

It’s a sharp wake-up call but also one rooted on mercy and hope. The starting point of getting healed is to acknowledge that we are ill – otherwise nothing than happen. If we put off telling the doctor about that lump we’ve discovered, or the sharp twinges we’re experiencing, or other symptoms, the danger is that by the time we finally go, it may be too late to treat. But if we go, even though it may be scary and difficult to make that move, then there is real hope of cure and new life.

In the same way, if we look at ourselves honestly, recognise what is really going on within us, and bring this before God, then we too can be set on the path of life, The author of Hebrews brings a real message of hope here – Jesus, who has shared our earthly life, who knows inside out, what it means to be human, tempted, weak and under pressures, can help us and brings us before God, as High Priest, for healing and renewal of our lives.

By reflecting on the message of these first two readings, I think we now have a glimpse of what Jesus was getting at when he tells the young man to sell all his possessions, to give the money to the poor and then to come and follow him. We’re told that the young man was dismayed – he had lots of possessions. He did genuinely love Jesus and longed to follow him and Jesus recognised this in him and loved him. But he could also discern that the young man wanted to follow him on his own terms – keeping his own security as a backup. Instead, Jesus is inviting him to a radical call to follow him, putting his trust, loyalty and hope in him alone. And this is a step which the young man, certainly at this stage, is unwilling to make. He goes away sadly, and we are left on tenterhooks – did he later change his mind and seek out Jesus or live the rest of his life gradually realising like the frog in the pot, that he had rejected the pearl of great price – the one who alone would give his life meaning?

So where does this leave us? I suggest our starting point are those words from Hebrews, ‘ For before him no creature is hidden but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account’. For our lives are a gift from God – pure gift – not something to which we have by entitlement. God knows the very depths of our hearts and our lives, and it is to God whom we will, one day, have to give an account of our lives.

We are therefore being asked some very hard questions today. If we want to live with integrity, to live as a follower of Christ as a man, woman or child made in his image, where am I really at this point? Am I really living as someone who is placing their trust on Christ or are there other things from which I am drawing my security? Is the life that I am living bringing life and hope to others as Jesus did, or is it focused on my own, fairly narrow concerns? And if a flashlight was turned on my life at this time, what would I really see there? Something of Christ or something which I would much rather have concealed?

It is hard to face these questions, and this is why we are not asked to do this alone but with Christ beside us in prayer. For Christ in his humanity, understands our weakness, our failures and our temptations and is alongside us if we take these first steps to face what is really going on in our lives and inside us. And if we are willing to do this – to face the reality and seek change, then through Him, we will receive both the mercy of God’s forgiveness and the grace to reorientate our lives, rooted on Him and others rather than ourselves.

What is true for us is also true for the society in which we live and the two are inextricably combined. It is why as Christians, we are always called to have a dual role – we live the world, just as Jesus through his incarnation, lived fully in the world – we are not apart from it. But as followers of Christ, we are always called to live out the prayer we say each day. ‘Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven’. Our calling is to help others to see how God’s kingdom or justice, mercy and peace can utterly transform our world for good.

As with the society in which Amos prophesied and that in which the Christian community of Hebrews lived, our world today urgently needs to hear that message and see the signs of hope of God’s kingdom breaking in. I just want to give you one example of this today and that is in the area of nutrition.

On Friday, Eleanor and I attended a service and discussions with Christians from other churches as part of a weekend of prayer and action against hunger. Entitled “Till all are fed”, this event supported by the WCC, World Vision, Act Alliance and many other bodies, explored the issue of hunger, malnutrition and starvation in the world and how Christians and other faith communities could act.

The event was arranged both to inform faith communities and also to see what they are doing so that their voice may be heard in some major events on nutrition which are taking place in 2025. 2025 is the final year of the UN Declaration of Action on Nutrition and it is when the WHO will review their global nutrition targets. There is also another major international conference on nutrition called the ‘Nutrition4 Growth Summit, which will be held in Paris next year.

The figures for nutrition are grim. According to a Unicef report, about 2.33 billion people globally currently face moderate or severe food insecurity. A report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN shows that about 733 million people are facing hunger this year – equivalent to 1 in 11 people (1 in 5 in Africa) and the situation is getting worse. The world is falling significantly short of achieving Sustainable Development Goal (2) on world hunger to achieve zero hunger by 2030.

Covid, rising number of conflicts, economic downturns and environmental issues have all contributed to this including our misuse of land and resources. There is also a major problem of providing healthy diets, over 2.8 billion people were unable to a healthy diet in 2022 – leading to growing numbers of those suffering obesity and many related diseases. Globally, one in four children under the age of five suffers from undernutrition which can lead to long-term damage.

At the same time, we are increasingly seeing countries, particularly in the West, turning inwards in themselves – keen to protect their national interest and to cut aid budgets to support this.

Solving world hunger will not be easy but it is a challenge we cannot and should not ignore. At one level, it will seeing what we can do here in Geneva both in what we provide through the Jardin de Montbrillant and in other ways. But it also about raising our voices and effective lobbying to the main groups who are leading precarious lives in Geneva at this time, receive proper food and other support, and asking our governments to seek ways of peace, equitable solutions especially for countries where there are high levels of hunger and where they have limited access to finance

There is a moral imperative for us to act – starting with how we can make an impact in our lives. One ‘take away we bought for the Conference yesterday was a flier entitled ‘The Ten Commandments of Food’ – how we can make a difference in our attitude, respect of, care and sharing of food’. I will put it downstairs on the notice board – do read and reflect on it.

“Live simply that others may simply live”. Let’s reflect on this and as prepare for Stewardship Sunday next Sunday, let’s think about how we can reorientate our lives in Christ and lead lives worthy of Him.

Amen

The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green