

Tuesday 1st July 2008 – Clergy Conference 2008

Talk by The Rt Revd David Atkinson, Bishop of Thetford

Taken from www.norwich.anglican.org

Why do you call me good?

Amos 5.10 – 13; 21 – 24

Matt 19. 16 – 22



The Girl with the Pearl Earring, Jan Vermeer

Taken from Olga's Gallery, www.abcgallery.com



Woman Weighing Pearls, Jan Vermeer

Taken from Olga's Gallery, www.abcgallery.com

Many of us struggle with the difficulties of trying to make a witness for God in a social context which seems to have abandoned him.

I want you to think of a person trying to do that, who sees the effects of national apostasy all around. The social institutions which began as a buttress to godly living are now corrupted. Society is increasingly divided between the haves and the have-nots. The poor are powerless. The political leaders often seem more interested in status than in justice. Even the judiciary is becoming politicized, and the worshipping communities all too often are becoming infected with the values of the godless society around.

Perhaps this person is trying to make a stand for God as a parish priest on one of our large estates; or is a social worker wanting justice for asylum seekers. Perhaps she is a Church Army officer working with the elderly, or a chaplain in one of our colleges or hospitals in the diocese. Perhaps it is a bishop in the House of Lords making a speech about social justice.

In fact the person I have in mind used to be a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees; a poor man from the country, dismayed by what he found in the towns. He lived in the northern kingdom of Israel during the prosperous reign of Jereboam II. His name was Amos.

Israel was enjoying political security unknown since the Golden Age of Solomon. Trade and commerce were flourishing. (8.5). Labour was moving from the land to the cities. There was increasing demand for luxury goods.

But there was a powerful aristocracy of wealth (6.1f.); the disappearance of what we would call the middle class; many unjust things about social life which Amos could not take - and he stood out against them in prophetic protest. Mostly to very little effect. Samaria fell; the Kingdom of Israel came to its end. His costly ministry brought him little obvious success.

First, he was dismayed by the growing gap between rich and poor and the powerlessness of poverty. 'You trample on the poor' (5.11). Secondly, the social institutions which should have been establishing justice were promoting injustice. 'They push aside the needy in the gate'. Thirdly, even the religious institutions were being hijacked for political ends. 'Do not seek Bethel - seek the Lord and live'. (5. 4-6).

So Amos is aroused, and in the name of Yahweh he sounds out his strong protest against injustice. And on what basis?

First, Amos says that Yahweh is the sovereign of all – creator and covenant lord, to whom all are accountable. Secondly, Amos' call for justice depends on God's holy and just nature. Thirdly, for Amos, justice is the social and political expression of covenant love. And fourthly, there is a shared common humanity to which Amos can appeal. As he surveys Damascus and Gaza he says 'You *know* - deep in your hearts you know - that people matter more than things. As he looks to Edom and Ammon, he says 'You *know* that hatred and cruelty and oppression are evil'. To Moab he says 'You *know* that institutionalized bitterness will only be destructive.'

In other words, there is an objectivity to morality which stands over our subjective feelings and preferences, something which confronts us and puts us under an obligation.

Let me try to illustrate what I mean about objectivity by looking at this Vermeer painting of the *Girl with the Pearl Earring*. She stands apart from us confronting us. Is she turning away from us or towards us? Is she enticing us to go with her, or is she fleeing, embarrassed from our intrusive gaze. Whatever interpretation we put on her look, there is the look. Objectively and distinct from us, she is there confronting us, questioning us, and evoking in us certain emotional reactions.

This parallels what I am saying about morality. There are those who say that morality is merely a matter of private preference and personal taste. But I want - with Amos - to say that there is something objective about morality. When I honour Mother Theresa for her self-sacrificing life in the back-streets of Calcutta, when I am faced with Bonhoeffer's brave stand against the Nazi tyranny, when I read of Jesus touching lepers and having compassion on the crowds, - and when I call these 'good', I am doing more than expressing a private preference and personal taste. I am saying something about Mother Theresa and Bonhoeffer and Jesus - not just about my feelings for them. There is something about them which confronts me and before which I am obliged to make a response.

And to return to Amos, weighing up the good and the bad, there stands behind him a sense of divine goodness, divine justice, divine love which calls his hearers into question.

Look now at this other picture by Vermeer – a painting of a woman weighing up the choices in front of her - while behind her there hangs another picture – of the last judgement.

Or, to give another example, in Iris Murdoch's *The Message to the Planet*, Marcus is talking to Ludens:

“What is sought is not one thing among many others, but the foundation of things. Something *necessary*, something which *must* be so... One must be worthy, and intense purity, and refinement of thought is required, even one might say a kind of holiness” (p. 163).

When the rich man asked Jesus “Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” In other words our very concept of goodness is rooted in the being of God, reflected in Jesus.

We are dealing here with what Lesslie Newbigin calls ‘public truth’. Our faith is not just about ‘truth for me’; it is rooted in the objective fact that through the cross of Christ, we are justified by his blood. (Rom 5.9).

Is it true that it was through the blood of his cross that God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven. Is it true that there is a cosmic dimension to Christ's cross? That God is a ‘just God and a Saviour’?

If that is true, we are called, like Amos, to speak that truth prophetically in the public place - to find appropriate ways of confessing in public as well as in private that Jesus Christ is Lord. And the way we do that will be different for a parish priest and for a chaplain in his or her cutting edge ministry. Either way it is costly.

We do so on the basis of a divine moral order which stands behind all things and all people; we do so on the basis of a divine love which reconciles all things to God through the blood of the cross. We do so in the faith that, whether he is acknowledged or not, Jesus Christ is Lord, and whether they know it or not, our neighbours are made as God's image. Redemptive divine justice transforms our human understanding of justice, and fills it with mercy, compassion and grace. That is our confidence to speak out the good

news of public truth in the public square, namely that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.