

## **The Prophet Amos**

When the king dies, the people mourn the king and then appoint another from among his family to rule over the land. We already have some idea who that king will be. Sometimes there is a little scrabble for the power, but we end up with a new king to rule over us. 'The King is dead, long live the king'. When a prophet dies, we mourn him, or at least those who knew him and



valued him, mourn him. Those who he has spoken out against, whom he has publicly castigated are probably glad to get rid of him and will be rejoicing. Some people, the poor and the oppressed, the good and the faithful will look around and ask, who now do we have to speak for us? Who now has the courage to speak truth to power? Who now will lead us in the paths which Yahweh has set for us? Yahweh does not just appoint a new prophet to follow on the old. He raises up prophets when the time and the person is right. The prophet Amos has died. Who now will speak in his place? There are the young Prophets Hosea and Isaiah, but will they stay the course? Will they remain faithful to their prophetic calling as Amos has done? I will not live long enough to see.

I have been a friend of Amos since his boyhood. There is nothing in our childhood which would have suggested that he was going to be one of the most powerful prophets of our generation. Prophets should be men of learning who have the authority of Yahweh sewn into their garments. Amos and I were shepherds from Tekoa, about a days walk south of Jerusalem and half a days walk from Bethlehem. As well as being a shepherd, sometimes Amos would hand over his flocks to me and travel as a dresser of sycamore trees. The fruit of the sycamore is a bitter fruit, but for those of us who are poor we eat it instead of the figs, which the wealthy can afford. In order to make it palatable you can puncture the fruit while it is still growing, and it becomes slightly sweeter. It is better than nothing. It is a long and laborious job climbing each tree and puncturing each fruit by hand. It gives you time to think, and as Amos would have said, time to observe.

Nomadic shepherds and agriculturists like Amos and I are some of the most despised people in our community, because we are different. We have to live out in the fields with our sheep. We do not work in the fields during the day and then return to our villages at dusk to eat and sleep. The wild beasts of the land are just, if not more, likely to prey on our flocks at night than they are during the day. We have to set a watch to stay alert in case a predator comes and steals our flock from us. Amos as a shepherd and a sycamore dresser, moving not only around the countryside with his flocks, but between Israel and Judah, was looked on with a great deal of suspicion. He didn't really care. He knew that Yahweh was with him, so what did it matter if men despised him. In many ways I suppose it made him an ideal candidate to be a prophet. He was so sure of his relationship with Yahweh and so sure of the words that he was given to speak, that just because men reviled him, despised him, and yes, feared him as well, it did not seem to touch him.

Amos was not sparing with his condemnation of what he saw as wrong. For him I have have written down prophecies against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab. And those were before he got to Judah and Israel. When I was a young man, keen and ambitious, I got a Rabbi to teach me to read and write and I practised in the many hours I spent watching the sheep. I became very proficient. I became able to earn my living as a scribe, writing letters and documents for others who cannot read and write as I do. This suits me well in my old age. Those words of Amos I committed in writing will be the first record anywhere, so I believe, of the voice of one of our prophets. I feel privileged to have been inspired to write down and order what he has said to us.

For us, the descendants of Abraham, the Prophet's words seem to swing between condemnation and a plea. Yahweh says all are under his Lordship. He wants all to follow him, but his words to us are constantly reminding us that we are his special people. Kings Jeroboam of Israel and Uzziah of Judah are not spared in the prophets words either. They to are reminded of the omnipotence of Yahweh and his divine justice, which is beyond that of mortal men, even kings.

*Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. "Do two walk together, unless they have made an appointment? Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Does a young lion cry out from his den, if he has taken nothing? Does a bird fall in a snare on the earth, when there is no trap for it? Does a snare spring up from the ground, when it has taken nothing? Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?"*  
Amos 3:1-6

As well as prophesying to Kings, Amos was not afraid even to walk into the holiest places and prophesy to the Priests. Amos may have been a man of Judah, but he was prepared to walk into the holiest shrine at Bethel in the Kingdom of Israel and pronounce judgement on Israel.

*'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. 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.* Amos 3:14,15

I do have to say that the Priests were not over enamoured of Amos as he taunted them to do their job properly, to bring the people to Yahweh and condemn any worship of idols and other gods. To be constantly reminded that Yahweh would not tolerate idolatry not in the neighbouring lands and certainly not in Israel and Judah became just too much for the Shrine Priests. Eventually they could stand him no longer, and kicked him out.

*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. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying: "Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land." 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.'* Amos 7:10-13

For Amos this was just a sign that his words were hitting home, and he was so pleased. I think he hoped that they would think again and things would change. He was ever an optimist, although you would not believe it from the words that Yahweh gave him to speak.

Time and again people would say to him, why don't you prophecy something good for us. He would just look at them sadly and try to explain to them that in order for good things to come to Israel, or to any of the lands that he prophesied about they had to return to a right way of living, where justice prevails and people old and young, rich and poor have enough to eat. No more wars, no more killing, no more grabbing of land just because your neighbour is momentarily weak.

Whatever else Yahweh gave to Amos to speak, Amos always believed that people were redeemable, and even if Yahweh's chosen people fell again and again, he would lift up from among them a remnant who would once again sing Yahweh's praises in the land which he had promised to them in the time of our forefather Abraham. Amos lived by that promise and died by that promise. I live by it as well, and as I record his final words, I still have hope for my people, as Amos had and Yahweh continues to have for us.

*'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 descendants of Jacob,' declares the LORD. 'For I will give the command, and I will shake the people of Israel among all the nations as grain is shaken in a sieve, and not a pebble will reach the ground. All the sinners among my people will die by the sword, all those who say, "Disaster will not overtake or meet us." 'In that day 'I will restore David's*

*fallen shelter – I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins – and will rebuild it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,’ declares the LORD, who will do these things. ‘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, and I will bring my people Israel back from exile. ‘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. 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.*

*Amos 9:8-15*