

Arnhem/Nijmegen, November 8th 2020. Remembrance Sunday and Stewardship Month.

Amos 5.18-27; Psalm 70; 1 Thess 4.13-end; Mat 25.1-13

Would Amos have qualified for the Nobel Peace Prize, had there been one in the 8th century before Christ?

To find an answer to the question, let us have a look at some of this year's nominees. Among them was Angela Merkel. Now that made sense, given her outstanding political achievements of bringing stability on the European continent. In comparison to her, we can't call Amos a diplomatic genius – he called the women of his people 'cows of Bashan', so maybe not. Another nominee, though, was the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, who ignited a global movement for climate change awareness, especially amongst young people, and held a scathing speech at the UN Climate Action Summit that made her sound like a modern day Amos. So Amos might have qualified after all...

In the end, the Prize was awarded to the World Food Program of the United Nations Organization. This program brings relief to many people in areas of conflict, giving them a chance to survive and eventually rebuild their lives. Just as in the nomination of Greta Thunberg we notice a strong link between peace and other factors of human wellbeing. A thriving planet is certainly one of those factors, as is access to food.

Peace is an holistic idea. It concerns all conditions that help human beings to thrive: healthy food, education, proper health care, decent housing and sanitation, freedom of speech, good job opportunities and working conditions. The list is endless.

In this holistic approach we recognize the biblical concept of Shalom, a situation where all are living in harmony with others, with creation and with themselves – and ultimately, with God. Enjoying any good thing in life at the expense of others, or with the exclusion of others, can never bring peace in the biblical sense, but is, in the Bible, exposed for what it is: injustice. Where one group of people denies one or more of these good things to another group, conflict will always follow.

If we wish to be peace makers, we therefore have to expose injustice, and to resist it.

So, Amos was a real peace maker! Exposing injustice was his middle name. It was his calling to tear away the veil that covers it up. In that respect, he had his work cut out for him: in his time things were looking quite nice on the outside. The 8th century before Christ was a time of relative security and prosperity. Religion also seemed to be flourishing; worship was conducted with enthusiasm, and the festivals really were something to look forward to. But this pretty looking front only served to hide a darker reality. The gap between the rich and the poor was widening, and the poor were being exploited. In chapter 2 Amos gives a graphic description: 'They have sold the innocent for silver' – 'They push the afflicted out of the way' – 'In the house of their god they drink wine bought with fines they imposed'. This ruthless exploitation of the vulnerable is just as bad as the war crimes of Israel's neighbours, exposed in chapter 1 – in fact, it is worse, as people who worship the one, true God of love should know better. Without a corresponding compassion and neighbourly love, their

worship is not just empty, it is like a stench in God's nostrils – it literally stinks to high heaven. Do you want to please God? Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Like water is essential to life on earth, so are justice and righteousness essential for life in the presence of YHWH.

How can these words of Amos help us in our own situation? Our church life has been severely affected by the pandemic. Communion in one kind only. Not being allowed to sing. No fellowship after the service. And especially those who are not comfortable with technology may feel excluded now that everything seems to happen online.

We have been kicked out of our comfort zone, that's for sure. It has left many of us feel hollow. A colleague of mine mentioned that to her it felt like a real identity crisis. This is a given that we will have to work through under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There is a lot of debate about being church in and after the pandemic. One thing that comes up again and again is that we have to look beyond our sadness about the current situation. To take a step back, despite our disappointment and grief, and to look long and hard at ourselves, individually and as a church.

Amos is clear: true worship is a holy life, dedicated to service. We can be forbidden to sing, to have coffee, to touch and to hug. But our true worship is serving each other and the world. This is our identity that cannot be taken away from us. Maybe this disruptive times make us realize again what it means to be the body of Christ that is broken for the world – not a social club for the benefit of its members, but a channel for God's healing and peace. To fulfil this calling we may have to be very creative, to think out of all the boxes we know. But may it guide us when our chaplaincy is discerning a way forward, a way to serve our communities and to be true witnesses to the good news of Jesus, in word and in deed. I find it quite nice to realize that our focus is also on feeding the needy, as we provide meals for the homeless, and are considering ways to support the Arnhem Food Bank. For this we will not be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but we will be called peace makers by Jesus himself, and can anybody think of a greater honour? May it encourage us to be generous – with our money, our time, our talents, our material goods. May we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, and renew our resolve to do so.

Let us do this now, using the following poem, written by Edwina Gateley, a modern day mystic and activist, back in the sixties – but for Sinai and Vietnam think Syria, Yemen, Nagorno-Karabach, Lesbos, and the rain forests of Brazil. This list, too, remains endless.

**Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**

We are called to say yes
that the Kingdom might break through
to renew and transform
our dark and groping world.
We stutter and we stammer

to the lone God who calls and pleads a New Jerusalem
in the bloodied Sinai Straits.

We are called to say yes
that honeysuckle may twine and twist its smelling leaves
over the graves of nuclear arms.

We are called to say yes
that children might play
on the soil of Vietnam where the tanks belched blood and death.

We are called to say yes
that black may sing with white
and pledge peace and healing for the hatred of the past.

We are called to say yes
So that nations might gather and dance one great movement
for the joy of humankind.

We are called to say yes
so that rich and poor embrace
and become equal in their poverty through the silent tears that fall.

We are called to say yes
that the whisper of our God
may be heard through our sirens and the screams of our bombs.

We are called to say yes
to a God who still holds fast to the vision of the Kingdom
for a trembling world of pain.

We are called to say yes
to this God who reaches out and asks us to share
this amazing dream of love.

**Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**

We are called to say Yes. Even now.
We are called to say Yes. Especially now.

Amen.