

The Pride That Comes Before a Fall

(Amos Chapter 6)

I don't know about you, but I followed the American Election last Tuesday with as much interest as I had the Canadian election back in June. Like people around the world I wanted to know what the results would be. As was mentioned in the weeks leading up to the vote, and was made clear in the results on Tuesday, there is a fissure in the United States between liberals and conservatives. It is a divide that is not only political, but it is also theological. As was highlighted repeatedly on Wednesday, the religious right voted in numbers that were unprecedented. Of the 51% of Americans who voted for President Bush, 25 % of this total was made up of the Religious Right. Upon exiting polling booths these voters said that moral values like same sex marriage and abortion were issues of equal or greater importance to homeland security and the war in Iraq. Voters in Eleven States passed constitutional amendments to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, effectively banning gay marriage. This 51% of the population also knew when voting Republican that Mr. Bush could appoint up to four new people to the Supreme Court during a second term. With these appointments abortion laws in the States could be re-written and the Republicans would leave their mark on the highest Court for years to come.

There were then the 49% who voted for Mr. Kerry. Although many of these voters were also Christian, they were not organized like the Religious Right and so didn't have the kind of influence on Tuesday that their theologically conservative compatriots had. These Christians insisted that poverty is also a religious issue. The environment - protection of God's creation - was also one of their religious concerns. As was their questioning the validity of the war in Iraq.

So in this election, one side talked about the number of unborn lives lost each year, while the other pointed to the 100,000 civilian casualties in Iraq. But both are life issues - according to the Pope, for example, who opposes both John Kerry's views on abortion and George Bush's war policy. Some church leaders challenged both candidates on whether just killing terrorists would really end terrorism and called for a deeper approach. And 200 theologians, many from leading evangelical institutions, warned that a "theology of war emanating

from the highest circles of government is also seeping into our churches."

While I applaud the very clear position President Bush has taken on Same Sex Marriage and his wanting to insure the protection of the unborn, I would like to suggest that the Prophet Amos has words of great caution to speak to the President and a nation that is as religious and powerful as the United States is today. He also speaks to Canadians who though lacking in the power and influence of the United States, share in its affluence. In the sixth chapter Amos begins with this warning:

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
the notables of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel resorts!

² Cross over to Calneh, and see;
from there go to Hamath the great;
then go down to Gath of the Philistines.

Are you better than these kingdoms?

Or is your territory greater than their territory,

³ O you that put far away the evil day,
and bring near a reign of violence

In these opening three verses Amos is challenging the false security of both those living Judah and those living in Israel. Remember that at this time the Jewish people were divided. Judah was the southern kingdom, with its capital in Zion. Zion was another name for Jerusalem. Mount Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, the people whom Amos addresses throughout his prophecy. As he speaks to them here he is challenging their attitude towards their security and wealth.

The eighth century BC, the time Amos lived, was a critical time in Jewish history. Both kingdoms of the divided nation had risen to heights of economic affluence that had not been experienced since the days of Solomon. Yet internal religious decay was sapping the strength of both kingdoms, and their social fabric was being destroyed. A new wealthy class was benefiting from the affluence of the time, growing ever richer while poor people became poorer than ever.

In 803 BC, some forty five years before Amos delivered his prophecy, the conquest of Syrian Damascus by the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III had silenced one of Israel's major enemies. With the Syrians out of the picture, the kingdom of Israel was able to expand its borders under King Joash (2 Kings 13:25). Israel and Judah entered a period of rest from constant warfare and turned their attention to internal affairs.

Joash's son, Jeroboam II, became king of Israel in 793 and reigned until 753 BC. Uzziah was on the throne of Judah from 792 to 740 BC. Under these two kings, Judah and Israel controlled a territory that was almost as large as Solomon's empire had been. Their wealth had grown both from expansion of trade and from the booty of conquered territories. Archaeology has yielded information about industrial activity within the nations, such as an impressive dyeing industry at Debir. Excavations at Samaria have produced large numbers of ivory inlays that confirm Amos's description of the wealthy in the capital city (6:4). The city of Samaria was protected by a huge double wall of unusual thickness. A palace, probably Jeroboam's, dominated the city with a massive tower.

The splendor and prosperity of the time, however, was masking the spread of internal decay. Oppression of the poor by many in the wealthy classes not only threatened the unity of the nation but also meant that God's laws were being violated.

In spite of the gradual deterioration, false optimism seems to have prevailed. And it is this false optimism Amos is addressing here. The cities he mentions in verse two were the capitals of surrounding nations that had been defeated by the Assyrians in the conquest I mentioned had occurred around the year 800. Amos is warning the Israelites that just as Calneh, Hamath and Gath fell, the same can and will happen to you. And yet you put off thinking about this, and act more violently towards those you want to control, the point he is making in verse 3.

In verses 4-7 he highlights how the affluent are living and then we see God's reaction to all of this in verse 8:

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,

and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
⁵ who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
⁶ who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
⁷ Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

The Lord GOD has sworn by himself
(says the LORD, the God of hosts):
I abhor the pride of Jacob
and hate his strongholds;
and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.

God is challenging Israel's pride, saying that he abhors it. They are proud because of their wealth. They are proud because of their strongholds. These strongholds are not only the walled city of Mount Samaria but their army that at this time numbered some 800,000 men. What God is grieved by is the fact that Israel's power and affluence was changing their heart. No longer did they care about following God and having as their priorities his priorities. And so he says "I will deliver up this city and all that are in it."

Please look at verses 9-10:

If ten people remain in one house, they shall die. ¹⁰ And if a relative, one who burns the dead, shall take up the body to bring it out of the house, and shall say to someone in the innermost parts of the house, "Is anyone else with you?" the answer will come, "No." Then the relative shall say, "Hush! We must not mention the name of the LORD."

Here Amos is illustrating what will happen to the people living in these fortresses. There may be a house where a small remnant of ten men will be left, but they too will die. The graphic death scene is described in verse 10. Some relatives, maybe from a different village will come and see what has happened. One of the first things the person will do is search the house for

survivors. The question is asked “Is anyone else with you”? meaning is anyone else alive”? to which the answer is given “alas no.” Then is given the exhortation “Do not mention the name of the Lord” These means that because all are dead it will not do any good to call on the name of the Lord to save someone.

Having painted for us what it will be like on the Day when God delivers up the city and all that are in it, he concludes this word picture in verse 11 by saying

See, the LORD commands,
and the great house shall be shattered to bits,
and the little house to pieces.

Amos ends the chapter with a number of absurd questions:

Do horses run on rocks?

Does one plow the sea with oxen?

But you have turned justice into poison
and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood—

¹³ you who rejoice in Lo-debar,

who say, “Have we not by our own strength
taken Karnaim for ourselves?”

¹⁴ Indeed, I am raising up against you a nation,

O house of Israel, says the LORD, the God of hosts,
and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath
to the Wadi Arabah.

The final subsection (6:12—14) abruptly begins with a series of absurd questions. Would anyone do anything as absurd as to run a horse on a rocky cliff? It would be crazy to do so, because it would be almost impossible for the horse to run without tripping or breaking a leg. Would anyone try to plow the rocky cliff with a pair of oxen? How could any plow ever manage to actually go through these rocks, and how could any plants actually grow there?

By using these ridiculous rhetorical questions, Amos gets his listeners to agree with him. This makes it easier for them to see the absurdity of their own action of turning righteousness into something vile, bitter, or poisonous, This type of injustice is as

absurd as riding a horse over a rocky field, it makes no sense. God cannot believe it. That his people are not living according to the standards of his law or demonstrating just behavior or pure heart attitudes in their relationships with God and other people.

Point out that Lo Debar means “Nothing” and Karnaim means horns or strength. Celebrating their victory over “nothing” and believing it was their own strength that gave them victory over Karnaim

Amos’ sarcasm turns these victories into absurd boasts because the people claim power they do not have. No wonder God hates their pride and absurd arrogance.

Ends with two predictions: God will raise up a nation that will oppress Israel from the northern tip Lebo Hamath to the southern tip, the valley of Arabah.

- Making Comparisons
- Riches and wealth and security in things
- Military Pride