

Seeker Service? Reflections and Questions - Amos 5 and Mark 10

These reflections and questions on Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 and Mark 10:17-31 are a supplement to the PCANZ and Presbyterian Support *Justice and Action* booklet. Based on Lectionary readings for October 11, 2015 they emerge from exegesis of the passages, offered to support your own prayerful reading and preparation around the complex and challenging issues raised.

You may prefer to explore the themes within your sermon format OR these questions could be used as a kind of 'spiritual listening' or prayerful reflection time within the service (in place of the sermon) perhaps interspersed with visuals or reflective music.

There are more questions here than you will need; select those which best aid your reflection.

Apply these to your own community and the context you're in – some aspects might speak more directly than others.

Setting: the prophet and the people

- **Amos was a marginalised outsider**, bringing a difficult and unwelcome message of judgment to God's people. The subsequent invasions and exiles in 722 and 587 BCE were seen in this light.
- **the economy was prospering** – at least for those who could make it work for them. In fact, gross inequality was prevalent
- **blatant injustices contrary to the Law were rife in Israel**, even though - as God's people - they were to mirror Yahweh's priority for the poor and vulnerable (Deut 10:17-18)
- **Israel's worship continued at Bethel; attendance was high!**
- Just before this section in Chapter 5, Amos pronounced 'maiden Israel' dead, lamenting that she was 'fallen, no more to rise'.

THEME ONE: 'Seek the Lord and live' (v 6, 14-15)

'Seek' is often a term for religious activity in the Bible. In the book of Amos,

attending worship at Bethel does not seem to count for 'seeking God' at all. In v 14, worship as a 'spiritual' act or posture is linked with **seeking the 'good' in the way life is lived and in the community as a whole.**

- **Why do you attend worship? What do you think it means to 'seek the Lord'?**

Consider how God is described in verses 8-9, as not only in terms of 'might', but of good and beautiful power that makes life.

- **What does this say about the God we worship?**
- **God's power makes life. In light of this, what is the church called to do? What does seeking 'good' look like today?**
- **Are there particular responses you can think of to make?**

THEME TWO: The shape of justice (v 7, 10-11)

The idea of the 'gate' is repeated in this passage, alongside the Hebrew words for justice (*mshpht*) and righteousness (*tzdiq*) in verses 7,12, 15. The 'gate' in ancient Israel was near the main entrance to the walled city where things were settled in public (see Ruth 4). It mattered to God because the social values embedded in the covenant were enacted there; it was the place that Israel *demonstrated* itself as the community of God's people, showing they did 'hate evil and love good'.

'Turning justice to wormwood' involved things like taking bribes or making excessive profits – money that was not rightfully earned. It meant 'trampling' on the poor who were already stretched beyond their means, and 'pushing aside' the needy at the gate.

- **Who do we listen to in the public realm - what voices in the media shape our opinions about inequality?**
- **Think of someone who 'reproves' or 'speaks the truth' on such matters. How do you regard them?**
- **In what particular places or situations in your city/community**

is the making of excessive profit impacting the poor?

- **Do you know of people whose needs are being pushed aside, or ignored? How might you respond?**

Amos announces **frustrating consequences** for the failure to seek Yahweh and live justly: building smart houses that will not become homes; planting pleasant vineyards whose fruit will not be enjoyed.

- **What ‘frustrations’ are evident in the church today? Do we have buildings we are not able to enjoy? What has been planted that is not bearing fruit?**

Amos, in announcing God’s judgment, seems also to announce God’s care for Israel, ‘fallen, no more to rise... forsaken ...with no one to raise her up’ (5:2). In verse 14-15, the possibility of ‘life’ restored and of God being with them is linked to their being as God is, and acting as God does: establishing justice ‘in the gate’.

- **God’s power makes alive. What possibilities does this passage suggest to you, of a grace-shaped future for God’s people?**

THEME THREE: The rich man who could not (Mark 10:17-31)

There is much to explore in this passage. In light of Amos, we will focus on the man’s Big Question to Jesus, and Jesus’ reframing of it.

In some church communities the focus is on personal spirituality and salvation – what it looks like and what ensures it; in others, people are more concerned about ethical actions and responsibilities. This interaction in Mark’s gospel shows how Jesus cut across such binary opposites: **the ‘kingdom of God’, the realm of God’s reign, extends over and involves every aspect of human life.** Throughout this interaction is a dynamic of giving and receiving as Jesus invites the man and the other hearers to give, and lose, and receive - *everything*.

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- In the beginning of the passage Jesus shifts the focus from '**what must I do...?**' to **who God is** (v19)
- In v 21 The invitation to ethical action ('go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor') **follows the encounter with Jesus, who looks upon the man lovingly and see what he lacks**
- Importantly, Jesus then reframes the ethical and the personal in light of the reality of the kingdom of God, and God for whom 'all things are possible' v27.

Remember, for Jesus' first century listeners 'riches' would have been seen as a sign of God's blessing on the man's life, that he 'lacked' nothing.

- **What might be your big question for Jesus today?**
- **Imagine Jesus looking at you with this loving clarity. Is there 'one thing' he might say you lacked? What about your church?**
- **What do you treasure?**
- **This image of the kingdom of God as being impossible to enter yet all-embracing, might raise more questions than answers for you. What are some of those questions?**
- **Is there something 'impossible' God might be calling you or your church to today?**

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