

## **"Listen to Amos - Listen to Jesus"**

Homily of September 19, 2004

by Father Brian Timoney

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There's a very, very strange parable today, very unusual because, at first sight, it seems to be approving of dishonesty. Actually, this steward perhaps for the very first time in his life, was being honest. How come? Well, you see, the bills that had been made out to the debtors, their notes, had originally been inflated, so that the steward could get a cut for himself. And now he is reducing them to what they should have been from the beginning. And so, in a certain sense, you could call him "honest." And the debtors, not realizing what the whole scheme had been, thought he was a wonderful guy and welcomed him into their homes. And his master is not commending him for being dishonest, but for being prudent, for being resourceful when the hard times came for him.

The message, I think, that Jesus wants us to draw from this parable is not that He is praising dishonesty, but that we too should be prudent and should be resourceful in our use of money, in the sense that we should use it in a responsible way, and to make sure that we would be welcomed into the kingdom. Of course, we cannot buy our way into the kingdom of God, but we must be convinced that the use of money and material things is related to the values of the kingdom.

What are those values? Well, Jesus laid them out for us very, very clearly, you remember in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel. You remember the story, about the king sitting in judgment and the king will say, "Inherit the kingdom, for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was naked and you clothed Me," and so on. You know the parable. And at the end, it says, "Whatever you do for the least of My brothers and sisters, you do for me."

If these values of the kingdom are ignored, people usually get hurt. And the people who get hurt most generally are the poor and the underprivileged. Now, it is not at all surprising that Jesus would speak in this way because He was reared on the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. And the prophet Amos would have been very, very familiar reading for Him. I have no doubt at all that He was deeply influenced in His thinking by the prophet Amos. Amos was a shepherd. He had no desire whatsoever to be a prophet. He did not want that job because history told him that the prophets were very unpopular. Now who would want a job that would make you unpopular? He didn't want it. And they were unpopular because the prophets spoke the truth and they pricked the consciences of people. And let's face it, we don't like to have our consciences pricked by anybody!

Amos, once he accepted this call from God, threw himself into it completely. There is obviously one thing that really upset him. And that was the blatant injustice towards the poor and the powerless and much of it hidden under the guise of religion. He speaks out in the name of God. His God and the God of Jesus does not accept that oppression is inevitable, or indeed that simple neglect of the poor is, in any way, acceptable. The message of Amos is that, as individuals and as a civic society, we cannot expect the blessing of God if we do nothing to relieve the misery of the poor.

In this country we have freedoms, resources, and opportunities that are the envy of millions around the world. We are the richest nation on earth and, by and large, very, very generous towards others. Is it not, then, all the more disgraceful, in a country that calls itself Christian, that there are millions who do not have access to good health care? Is it not disgraceful that there are so many thousands and thousands who are homeless, or, if not homeless, are on the very verge and cannot afford to feed their children a decent meal from month to month? And, if you doubt the truth of that statement I invite you then to come to the rectory door any evening, from Monday to Friday, at 3:30, and see the line of people there who are lined up to get help from our St. Vincent dePaul Society. And God bless those people of St. Vincent dePaul, the work they do! And God bless you for the support that you give to that. But, it should not be necessary. The St. Vincent dePaul people should not have to be there. That line of people should not have to be there. It's just plain wrong.

Is it not shameful that, in so many of our schools, the children do not have basic supplies and the teachers have to buy them from their own meager wages? There is something wrong in our society, something very, very, very wrong. There is serious inequality in our country, and to deny it or to ignore it is to put ourselves in peril as Christians. As citizens, we should speak up. We should say, "This is not good enough..... This is not us..... This is not American. We are better than this and we can be better than this." As Christians, we must be convinced that every single human being, every man and woman, every child, is a child of God, created by God, that in Jesus Christ, we are brothers and sisters, and called to be responsible to one another and for one another.

I am afraid that Amos would find lots of fodder for his fiery speech in our present social climate and Jesus would continue to tell us that we cannot serve both the true God and Mammon, the god of wealth. Jesus would continue to tell us that we are to use the material things that have been given to us by God to assure entrance for us into that kingdom whose basic values are, above all, care, care for the poor, the neglected, the powerless. Today, in this coming week, let us listen to Amos. Let us listen to Jesus. Amen.