

Let Justice Roll down like Waters

September 18, 2016
25th Sunday in Ordinary TimeReadings: Amos 8.4-7; 1 Timothy 2.1-8;
Luke 16.1-13**By Matthew Ramage**

Today's rich scripture readings could be taken in several different directions, any of which would lead to a valuable homily. Based on the second reading, for instance, one might choose to preach on what it means for God to will the salvation of the entire human race (1 Tim 2.4). Or one could explore the topic of mediation, explaining how Christ's unique role is compatible with participatory redemption on the part of the faithful and the saints, in particular that of the Theotokos (1 Tim 2.5). The present reflection, however, has the first reading as its basis, and from there proceeds to show its close connection with the gospel offered to us by Mother Church this day.

As is often the case, it is easy to neglect the first reading, especially when it is a short selection from what many consider an obscure text. Amos is one of the twelve "Minor Prophets" of the Old Testament, authors who are not minor in importance but rather minor insofar as their books are much shorter than those of the "Major Prophets" such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Dating to the middle of the eighth century B.C., Amos is the bible's oldest prophetic book. To understand its message, it is important to note that, although the man Amos was from the southern kingdom of Judah, the Lord called him to direct his prophetic message against the northern kingdom of Israel, which had fallen into idolatry after splintering from the southern Davidic kingdom nearly 200 years earlier.

The Prophet's Warning

"Hear this, you who trample upon the needy," the prophet exclaims. While the small selection for today does not provide us the precise nature of the atrocities being committed in Amos's day, the larger context of the book of Amos makes it clear that social injustice and idolatry in the northern kingdom of Israel were leading quickly to its downfall. The Lord tells his people, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." Why did God "hate" the people's liturgies? Some commentators point to a danger prevalent in every age: religious ritualism, the habit of merely going through the motions in worship or thinking that by our correct technical liturgical performance we can manipulate God's will.

Ritualism is a real danger in the spiritual life, but Amos has something even more specific in mind here. He conveys this message to the people: "For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: 'Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nought.'" Since they ceased to worship God in the Temple at Jerusalem, the northern kingdom of Israel had for centuries been worshipping calf idols at Bethel, Dan, and (apparently) Gilgal. As Amos warns, the tree is now about to be known by its fruit, as this northern kingdom will be conquered by Assyria and taken into exile in the year 722 B.C.

The beginning of the chapter from which today's text is taken is especially critical to grasping its message. Amos writes, "Thus the Lord God showed me: behold, a basket of summer fruit. And he said, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A basket of summer fruit.' Then the Lord said to me, 'The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them.'" Does it not seem strange for the Lord to warn that he will never "pass by" his people again? In other words, is the Lord "passing by" not something the people would want to avoid? Why does Amos speak as if it is a bad thing?

At first it may appear that the Lord “passing by” simply indicates an all-too-brief coming and going, but in truth the expression evokes the opposite reality. Earlier in the Old Testament, the Lord’s “passing by” (Hebrew *br*) is used to depict theophanies, in particular the Lord’s revelations to Moses and Elijah. In one especially important instance of this event, the Lord himself proclaims to Moses, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy and faithfulness, keeping merciful love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex 34.6). But if the Lord will no longer be “passing by” Israel, what does this say about the prospect of his continued love and mercy toward his people? The fact that Israel was punished with exile surely tells us something in this regard.

Reason for Hope

At the same time, at the end of Amos – yet only at the book’s very closing – the vision of God’s punishment gives way to a glimmer of hope for restoration:

“In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old. . . . I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them,” says the LORD your God. (9.11,14-15)

The fruit theme from the book’s previous chapter returns here. Despite their injustice toward one another and infidelity to their covenant with God, the Lord remains faithful to his people. Though exiled for a time, they will once again “eat their fruit” and be planted upon their own land – not because of their own merits but because of the Lord’s steadfast love toward them.

Of course, for Amos this is no excuse for religious indifferentism or moral laxity. On the contrary, his prophetic message resounds loud and clear. Our reading began with the Lord proclaiming, “Hear this, you who trample upon the needy.” And what precisely is it that we who are unjust need to hear, according to Amos? “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5.24).

The Dishonest Steward

Today’s gospel picks upon on this same theme of social justice and applies it directly to our spiritual lives. The parable of the dishonest steward is one of those enigmatic texts whose message is by no means immediately obvious. The master in the parable “commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently.” Jesus himself then comments on the story, “I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth.” Does this mean that the Lord rewards us when are unjust – when we lie, cheat, and steal? By no means, of course. But why, then, did the Lord give us this parable, which at first blush seems to contradict Amos’s exhortation to justice in the first reading? What do we stand to learn by becoming “friends” with dishonest people?

St. Augustine responds that Jesus gave us the example of the dishonest steward “not because the servant cheated but because he exercised foresight for the future.” That is to say, at its heart this parable is an exhortation to cultivate the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom with regard to our interior life. It carries the grave warning that a lukewarm and haphazard approach to our faith – presuming that virtues will just fall into our laps as long as we believe – will eventually lead to our demise if we do not have a concrete change of priorities in life and a spiritual plan.

The same basic message was revealed by Amos in the first reading, and this time it is couched in the medium of a parable. The vices of imprudence, religious indifference, social injustice, and moral laxity all lead to exile. And if we do not exercise more foresight regarding our spiritual future, we are setting ourselves on the path to *eternal* exile from God.

After uttering this parable, Jesus laments that “the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” This prompts St. Augustine to ask again: “In what life, after all, did that steward insure himself like that? . . . He was insuring himself for a life that was going to end. Would you not insure yourself for eternal life?” In other words, if people of our day put an immense amount of effort into securing merely a little more for themselves in this life – whether it be possessions, beauty, or a little more time on this earth – why do we Christians not take at least as much care to secure for ourselves eternal things? How can we who are blessed with knowledge of God be complacent about life’s most important things when people who are unaware of our heavenly calling exercise remarkable competence and diligence in the most trivial of affairs?

We too, to use the words of Jesus, need to prove ourselves “trustworthy in very small matters” if we are to be entrusted with great ones. In the spiritual life, this means learning like St. Therese to do little things with great love in the ordinary circumstances of our life. Living our particular vocation with excellence, exercising prudence with foresight to our eternal calling – this is what our Lord is calling us to in the parable of the dishonest steward.

About the Author

Dr. Matthew Ramage is assistant professor of theology at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas..

FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, Homily (September 23, 2007), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict>

Rev. George W. Rutler, “These Parables: The Unjust Steward,” Crisis Magazine (June 1, 2003), available at: <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2003>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Book of Amos,” available at: <http://www.usccb.org/bible/amos/0>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Social injustice and idolatry in the northern kingdom of Israel led quickly to its downfall.***
- ***But the Lord remains faithful to his people, not because of their own merits but because of his steadfast love toward them.***
- ***St. Augustine comments that Jesus gave us the example of the dishonest steward “not because the servant cheated but because he exercised foresight for the future.”***
- ***We put an immense amount of effort into securing possessions, beauty, a little more time on this earth – but why do we not take as much care to secure for ourselves eternal things?***
- ***If we do not exercise more foresight regarding our spiritual future, we are setting ourselves on the path to eternal exile from God.***
- ***Living our particular vocation with excellence, exercising prudence with foresight to our eternal calling – this is what our Lord is calling us to in the parable of the dishonest steward.***