

A THIRST FOR THE WORD
A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Let me begin this morning by looking at the first few verses of the OT lesson from the book of the prophet Amos. Amos 8:4-6 **4 Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail, 5 Saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit? 6 That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat?**

This is a description greed that is so hungry, so rapacious, that it cannot wait for the holy days to be over so that they can get back to cheating the poor; that those who would do as is described here, that they would do their best to cheat the poor, to put them into such a state of debt that they would have to sell themselves into slavery after being cheated by having their food meted out in measuring baskets that are too small and with weights for their balances than are lighter than what they are supposed to weigh. This is the exact opposite of what Jesus said in Luke 6:38 **38 Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.**

You may say, “ That sort of thing can’t happen nowadays, but it can, and does, sometimes in more subtle ways. Sometimes it was part of a local culture. Every time I read this passage I am reminded of a story of an incident that took place in my home town long ago Let me tell you a story. I was born and grew up in a small town that was the county seat in a poor region of eastern North Carolina. The economy was based on two things, farming and textiles. There were three textile mills in the town that converted the locally grown cotton into cloth and socks (one of the mills was a knitting mill). The other main crops of the farms were tobacco, corn, and peanuts, in fact tobacco was more important than cotton. This was farming country, not ranching country, Few farms kept much, if any, livestock for food: possibly a milch cow, a goat or two, and maybe a pen with a few hogs, but no range cattle. The land was too valuable for the crops it would grow to think of using it FOR pasture. However, there were lots of mules. Much plowing was done using mulepower. Even as late as 1958, North Carolina led the nation in the

number of mules being used in agriculture. It took a good while before agriculture became anywhere close to being mechanized in the state.

It seemed the 19th century was not that long ago, and there were many 19th century practices still going on. Some of the mills had houses that they rented to their workers, who could not afford to rent anywhere else, and who could not even think of buying a house, even at Depression era prices. I don't know if I ever knew whether any of the mills had company stores, but in the farming world, there was something like that. There were some large farms there in that county, large at least by eastern standards, some of more than 1,000 acres; and there were some large landowners who owned more than one such farm. Many of those farms, perhaps most, were share-cropped; and one of those large landowners had what amounted to a company store for the sharecroppers on his farms. It was a General Store on Main Street in the County Seat. I am not going to tell you the name of the store or of the family that owned it. The store is closed, a victim of big box stores, and the family is not doing as well as they used to because much of their income was related to tobacco, which doesn't bring in much money any more.

The store was a good store. It literally carried just about everything: groceries, hardware, dry goods, and top-quality men's and women's clothes and shoes. Some traditions in the South died hard. In the grocery section, there was even a 50 gallon drum of molasses with a hand pump. The molasses was sold by the pint or even by the gallon. I know this because I worked in the men's clothing store of that store several years at Christmas time when they needed extra help.

I do not know that the store ever literally cheated anyone by giving light weights of anything that sold by weight, or scant measures of things, such as the molasses, that were sold by volume. I don't think that happened when I worked there. What was going on, however, was a sort of bond servitude, of the store being a company store for the sharecroppers on the family's farms.

The story I want to tell goes back to the days of the patriarch of the family who founded the store. The sharecroppers were required to buy all of their food and clothing from the store, for which I think they got a slight discount. The only way they ever got any cash was by doing odd jobs on the side, on the sly, for others, or by making a draw against their share of the crop, and that was a practice that was frowned on because the money was likely to be frittered away on drinking and gambling. This ended up being a sort of slavery, not chattel slavery, but bond-servanthood. The cropper's purchases and draws were kept in an account that was matched up against the value of his share of the value of the crop(s). If it was a good year, he would get

money in September or October when all the crops were sold, either in cash or on his account. In a bad year he would be in debt to the store, and would be bound to work for them as a sharecropper the next year. And even after a very good year, there was the problem of how he and his family would get through the rest of the year.

The story that is told is that of a black sharecropper named Erastus, going into see about his account after all the crops had been sold and of what the owner of the store and the farm told him. Mr. W said to him, “ ‘Rastus, you had a really good year. You’ve got enough left to buy a new pair of shoes!” Can you see now why our OT lesson reminds me of this: Amos 8:6 **6 That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes;**

Such things happened over 2000 years ago in Israel, and here, in the United States less than 100 years ago. What are we to make of this? Why did God have Amos write this passage in his book? Part of the answer lies in the first 3 verses of this chapter, which we did not hear. Amos 8:1 **Thus hath the Lord GOD shewed unto me: and behold a basket of summer fruit. 2 And he said, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A basket of summer fruit. Then said the LORD unto me, The end is come upon my people of Israel; I will not again pass by them any more. 3 And the songs of the temple shall be howlings in that day, saith the Lord GOD: there shall be many dead bodies in every place; they shall cast them forth with silence.**

God gave Amos a vision, that does not seem to have any particular meaning. The meaning comes from the rest of chapter, the rest of what God said to him. The basket of fruit is a symbol of the harvest, the fruit of the summer; and the summer is over. So, it is also a symbol of warning, that God shall harvest for himself the penitent people of Israel and leave the sinners, and leave the impenitent who cheat and crush and enslave the poor, to whatever befalls them.

What is going on here is that God gave Amos many great oracles and prophecies about the end of the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam and also during the reign of Uzziah the king of Judah. We don’t really know when Amos was born or when he died. We do know that Uzziah died in 758 BC, so the book of Amos was written sometime between 780 BC to 750 BC. What we have in the Book of Amos are several prophecies, among them, one for the destruction of Israel, and another in Chapter 9 for the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. What happened was that Tiglath-Pileser became king of Assyria in 745 BC and conquered the northern tribes of Israel so completely that in 722, the northern kingdom of Israel simply ceased to exist – prophecy fulfilled. But there is more for us in this lesson.

There are at least two things we have to see in this lesson: God is angry at Israel because they have broken his covenants, especially His laws against exploiting the poor, or anyone, in **Leviticus 19:35-36** **35 "You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. 36 You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.** A ephah was a dry measure equal to about 5/8 of a bushel, and a hin was measure of liquids and was about 8/10 of a gallon.

God has been very slow to anger, but now he has had enough. It is time that Israel has to be punished. Note that Judah is not very far behind. Israel was destroyed and her people were carried off to the north in 721, just as is written in Amos 5:27 27, Amos writes, **“ and I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,”** says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts. Judah did not have very long to wait, only 122 years later, Nebuchadnezzar II attacked Judah in 599 BC and conquered Jerusalem in 597 sending thousands of Jewish captives to Babylon.

Is this supposed to send a message to us? Yes, I think it is supposed to. The old Testament does not exist just to give us a knowledge of the history of the Jewish people that led up to the life of Jesus. What St. Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14-17, was not said in a partial vacuum” **14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it 15 and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.** Yes, the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke had been written by the time Paul wrote this to Timothy, but he was thinking more of the entire OT rather than any of the NT, although some of the NT was considered to be Scripture by Christians by the time Paul wrote this second letter to Timothy. So we should consider the words of the OT that were warnings to the Jews to also be warnings to us in particular what Amos had to say in Amos 8: verses 11-12 **11 "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord GOD, "when I will send a famine on the land- not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. 12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.”** The reason the people of Judah will not find the word of the Lord is that they rejected it when it was spoken by Amos just

as they had repeatedly rejected it when spoken by others of God's Prophets such as Elijah and Elisha, Hosea, Joel and Jonah. God not only warned them – and us – about the consequences of ignoring his word; but He also told us through Amos more explicitly of those consequences in the last two verses of our lesson: Amos 8:13-14 13 **"In that day the lovely virgins and the young men shall faint for thirst. 14 Those who swear by the Guilt of Samaria, and say, 'As your god lives, O Dan,' and, 'As the Way of Beersheba lives,' they shall fall, and never rise again."** They had rejected God so consistently that he had turned His back on them so that they could not find His word after they finally decided they needed it to live. The death they shall suffer is the final death of the soul, so that, **"they shall fall, and never rise again."**

Recognizing this as a message to us should quite literally, "scare the hell out of us".

As I was thinking about this sermon, I came across a sermon preached by an acquaintance, Fr. Matt Kennedy, who is the rector of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Binghamton NY. That church is in the ACNA, but not in the REC, so he has a different set of readings for each Sunday than we do. Last Sunday, he preached on the Parable of the Wedding Feast, the one that ends with the man who does not have on a wedding garment being rejected. and cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Matt's theme was a matter of looking at this as a matter not of God's rejection of the man, but of the man's rejection of God. As I have preached on that parable, the wedding garment is faith. Faith is the ticket that gets you through the door and into the wedding feast to stay, not just for dessert, but forever as a member of the family. But then he turned a corner on me and brought up what Jesus said about bearing fruit in Matthew 7:18-23 18 **A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. 21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'**

What is going on here? St Paul tells us in Romans 10:9&10 that if we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved; yet here are people who call Jesus, Lord and claim to have done good works in His Name, that are people whom He will cast out. The commentaries tell me that such people were not true

disciples because Jesus could discern that they were in truth, lawless people; that is they were not righteous. Their works were not good works as James defined them in James 2, as works that proceed from faith.

Faith is the key, and faith is a gift. The problem is not that God has not given us the gift of faith; the problem is that we either misuse it, barely use it, or we don't use it at all. Have you ever thought about what would be a characteristic of true faith? Think of it, there is one word that describes true faith; and that word is trust. Can you truly believe someone unless you trust him? The bible tells us that all the way back in Genesis 15:6, Which St. Paul quotes in Romans 4:3 [3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."](#) I have seen this misquoted in so many places that I had come to believe that what it really said was, "[Abraham trusted God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.](#)" We have to trust Jesus. We have to trust that what the Bible says is true. And then we have to act on that trust. We have to be willing to trust God so much that we will let Him run our lives, because trust is an important component of a true faith.

There is a prayer that I first saw in Jan Karon's book, *At Home in Mitford*. Some people call it the sinner's prayer. It is a prayer that can be prayed out of desperation, in the hope that God is really there, and that he might hear it and act on it. If you can pray this prayer and really mean it, it will be because God gave you the gift of faith to do that; and doing that and acting on it will eventually change your life. I know, because I had to do it, because I was moved to do it when I read it in her book. Here is all it says; Pray it along with me:

God, thank you for loving me, and for sending Your Son to die for my sins. I sincerely repent of my sins and receive Christ as my personal savior. Now as your child, I turn my entire life over to you. Amen.

That's all there is to it. Will it change your life? I hope so. In the next 5 minutes? Probably not, but it could happen. You may need to take a daily dose of God's word, something for which many are hungry and thirsty, but don't even know what it is that they lack.

Will you trust God with your life? You ought to, after all, it is He who keeps the whole world together. Do you trust the pilots who fly the planes you travel in? Can you trust your life to a man, and ordinary human who is not Jesus Christ, more than you trust God? Do you trust yourself to run your life more than you would trust God to do so? If you do, you had better rethink that.

Why do you come to church each Sunday? Is it to hear the word of God truly preached and to partake of the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ? I hope so, but if you do not try to live it when you leave the church, you are cheating yourself. God's message to Amos was very clear: there are people who needed to hear God's word and turned away from it when they did hear it. Then, later, when they hungered and thirsted for His Word, they could not find it. Amos could not know what St. John said, [John 1:1](#) **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.** To thirst for the Word is to thirst for Jesus Christ. If you truly turn your life over to Jesus Christ, you shall never thirst again.

AMEN.