

15th Sunday Ordinary Time - B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Amos 7:12-15

Amos is the oldest of the books of prophetic literature, dating around the time 760 to 750 B.C. He appears to have been a layman with no special training for the religious ministry. Amos wrote during the reign of Jeroboam II of the Northern Kingdom (Israel). It was a time of peace and prosperity but also a period of social and religious corruption. Amos was a Judahite (Southern Kingdom) from the town of Tekoa which is about 5 miles south of Bethlehem.

Of all the books of prophecy, Amos is the least hopeful. Although he never makes a direct reference to the covenant at Mount Sinai, it underlies all his messages. In 3:1-2 for instance he reminds the people that God has acknowledged Israel as His covenant people but they abused the privilege. Since they have ignored the covenant, the curses associated with it shall befall them. Although Amos directs his words primarily at the leadership (the king in 7:10-11, the priests in 7:16-17, and the upper classes in 4:1-3 & 6:1) the coming judgement will affect the entire people because the nation of Israel has a common destiny. In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, the priest of Bethel has sent a message to Jeroboam II reporting what Amos has said "Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land."

¹² **Amaziah,**

The name means "Yahweh is mighty."

[priest of Bethel,]

Bethel means "house of El (God)" It is located about 14 miles north of Jerusalem. It was a place of assembly where Jeroboam I had set up a golden calf (he set up another at Dan) and installed priests who were not Levites (1 Kings 12:28-31). Amaziah was not a priest of Yahweh.

said to Amos, "Off with you, visionary,

Visionary is a contemptuous name for "prophet".

flee to the land of Judah!

Go home - you are a foreigner here. Amos is a Judahite (Southern Kingdom) and Bethel is on the border but in the Northern Kingdom. Amos is interfering in Israel's religious and political affairs.

There earn your bread by prophesying,¹³ but never again prophesy in Bethel; for it is the king's sanctuary and a royal temple."

Bethel was the official sanctuary of Jeroboam II. It is a place of immunity and a holy place under

the king's protection.

¹⁴ Amos answered Amaziah, "I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores.

Amos is listing his credentials. He is not a professional prophet or connected with them. He is a shepherd (a lonely occupation) and a dresser of sycamores. The sycamore is a fruit related to the fig but smaller. It is the food of the poor. At a certain point in its development, the dresser had to puncture the fruit so it would grow large enough to become edible. This was seasonal work.

¹⁵ The LORD took me from following the flock, and said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel.

Amos is a prophet not by his choice or inheritance or training, but because of the personal intervention of God.

2nd Reading - Ephesians 1:3-14

In the time of Paul Ephesus was the leading city in Asia Minor. It contained the temple of the Roman goddess Diana, the goddess of fertility, which was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The city's jewelers did a very profitable business through the manufacture of statuettes of the goddess – which explains why the people rioted, at the instigation of Demetrius the silversmith (Acts 19:24ff) against Paul and his companions, who naturally, preached against superstition and the worship of idols. Paul had to leave in a hurry because of the riot and left Timothy as the head of the church (1 Timothy 1:3). Tradition has it that Timothy died there confessing the Name of Christ.

It is not known if the Ephesians were the first recipients of this letter. The words “who are at Ephesus” (Ephesians 1:1) do not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts leading some scholars to believe this may have been a circular letter to all the churches in the region. It has a strong parallel, in both form and content to Colossians and may have been written to develop the teaching contained in Colossians. Scholars have dated this letter during Paul's captivity in Rome (AD 61-63).

Today's reading is a hymn of praise to God for the plan of salvation He has devised and brought to fulfillment for the benefit of men and all creation. In the Greek it is one long complex sentence full of relative pronouns and clauses which give it a designated unity.

³ Blessed be

The blessing begins with a formula known from the Old Testament and commonly used in Jewish and early Christian prayers (Tobit 13:1, 1 Peter 1:3). The formula recognizes God's greatness and rejoices of the divine gifts which have been received.

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing

References to God the Father, Jesus the Christ, and spiritual blessings have been seen as a reference to the Holy Trinity because it is the Holy Spirit who distributes the gifts of God.

in the heavens,

Indicates unity of the heavenly and earthly worlds.

⁴ as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world,

The choice is not accidental, but part of God's plan from the very beginning.

to be holy and without blemish before him.

In the Old Testament, the victim offered to God had to be unblemished, blameless (Genesis 17:1). All the baptized are called to live a holy life (be saints); being a “believer” commits us to do so. Holiness is, therefore, a gift of God which implies an obligation to further its development. Complete holiness will be attained only in heaven.

“It is asked how anyone can be saintly and unblemished in God’s sight. . . . We must reply (that) Paul does not say He chose us before the foundation of the world on account of our being saintly and unblemished. He chose us that we might become saintly and unblemished, that is, that we who were not formerly saintly and unblemished should subsequently be so.” [Saint Jerome (A.D. 386), *Commentaries On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 1,1,4]

“‘You have been chosen,’ he says, ‘in order to be holy and unblemished before His face.’ . . . He Himself has made us saints, but we are called to remain saints. A saint is one who lives in faith, is unblemished and leads a blameless life.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392-397), *Homilies On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 1,1,4]

In love ⁵ he destined us

Not individual predestination, but God's choice for all mankind to share in His covenant life (Romans 8:15).

for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, ⁶ for the praise of the glory of his grace

This introduces a recurrent theme in Ephesians: that man, understanding God's plan, should praise Him and give thanks.

“So that our love for Him may become more fervent, He desires nothing from us except our salvation. He does not need our service or anything else but does everything for this end. One who openly expresses praise and wonder at God’s grace will be more eager and zealous.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392-397), *Homilies On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 1,1,6].

that he granted us in the beloved.

A baptismal reference to Jesus (Mark 1:11).

⁷ In him we have redemption by his blood,

Redemption implies setting free. Since the golden calf mankind was not free, could not approach God directly, could not approach without a sacrificial animal. Jesus' death on the cross provided the once for all sacrifice which consecrated the altar and all mankind (Galatians 4:5).

the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished upon us.

Forgiveness of sins follows redemption, for there would be no forgiveness of sin for anyone before redemption occurs. First then we need to be redeemed, to be no longer subject to our captor and oppressor, so that having been freed and taken out of his hands we may be able to receive the benefit of remission of sins. Once our wounds have been healed we are called to live in accord with piety and the other virtues.” [Origen (post A.D. 244), *Commentaries On Ephesians*].

In all wisdom and insight, ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.

We have had detailed for us the blessings contained in God's plan:

- 1) It is His choice
- 2) We have divine sonship (covenant family)
- 3) We have been redeemed (not so much bought, as a slave changes owners, but as having been rescued from a controlling power) and we can understand this plan.

Mankind's firstborn were redeemed at the first Passover and all the people of Israel were set free at Mount Sinai when they were sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice. But they immediately fell into sin (the golden calf) and became God's slaves/servants rather than His children; they were not free to approach God without a sacrifice. Jesus' death on the cross provided the final bloody sacrifice and made it possible for all to approach and receive forgiveness for sins. Mankind was redeemed from the slavery of sin, from the power of Satan, from death. Old Testament (covenant) sacrifice was messy, public, expensive, and ineffective. Now, mankind has been given back their dignity.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the one who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, ¹² so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ. ¹³ In him you also,

The “you” is a reference to the Gentile converts of Ephesus to whom Saint Paul is talking.

who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised holy Spirit,

In the old covenant, the male child was sealed to God through circumcision. In the new covenant

we are all sealed through baptism (Colossians 2:11-12).

¹⁴ which is the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God's possession, to the praise of his glory.

“He shows how great are our expectations. This grace is already being given, through which miracles were worked: the dead were raised, lepers cleansed and demons driven out. All of these and similar things have the status of a pledge, so it will become obvious that the faithful will enjoy in the future a much greater grace.” [Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 425), *Epistle To The Ephesians*, 1.14]

Gospel - Mark 6:7-13

This gospel reading immediately follows last week's reading where Jesus was rejected by His own people. As you will recall, that reading ended “He was amazed at their lack of faith.”

⁷ He [Jesus] summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two

This isn't just safety in numbers, two witnesses are required in any life and death situation (Deuteronomy 19:6). Preaching the gospel of Jesus the Christ is preaching about spiritual life and death.

and gave them authority over unclean spirits.

The sending out of the Apostles is an extension of Jesus' ministry of teaching, healing, and exorcizing. Recall that several weeks ago we heard of His healing the sick and the miracle we skipped between calming the sea and healing was exorcizing demons. They are to go and do everything that He has been doing.

⁸ He instructed them to take nothing for the journey

Jesus requires them to be free of any form of attachment if they are to preach the Gospel. A disciple, who has the mission of bringing the Kingdom of God to souls through preaching, should not rely on human resources but on God's providence. This also sets the stage for the feeding of the five thousand which we will study in 2 more weeks.

but a walking stick –

The parallel gospels (Matthew 10:10 and Luke 9:3) prohibit the disciples from taking a staff. This could be a misreading of the Aramaic “*l'*” (except) for “*l'*” (not).

no food, no sack, no money in their belts. ⁹ They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic. ¹⁰ He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave from there.

Traveling missionaries depended on local hospitality. This command prevents social climbing and searching for better quarters.

“But should the teacher himself be a turncoat and teach a different doctrine so as to undermine (this teaching), do not listen to him. But if he promotes holiness and knowledge of the Lord, welcome him as the Lord. Now, as regards the apostles and prophets, act strictly according to the precept of the Gospel. Upon his arrival every apostle must be welcomed as the Lord; but he must not stay except one day. In case of necessity, however, he may stay the next day also; but if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. At his departure the apostle must receive nothing except food to last until the next night’s lodging; but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet [*The Didache* (ca. A.D. 60), 11.2-6].

¹¹ Whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet in testimony against them."

The washing of the traveler's feet upon arrival was a sign of welcome. When local hospitality is not offered, leave quietly. No recriminations or reprisals.

¹² So they went off and preached repentance.

Jesus preached repentance (like John the Baptist) even before He selected the 12 (Mark 1:14-15). They are now to do the same – remember there has been no resurrection yet, we are still early in Jesus' public life.

¹³ They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Again, two of the miracles which Jesus had previously worked (driving out demons and curing the sick). Mark is the only evangelist who speaks of anointing with oil. Oil was often used for treating wounds (Isaiah 1:6, Luke 10:34). The Apostles also use it for the miraculous cure of physical illnesses by virtue of the power (authority) given them by Jesus. In this verse there is a “hint” of the sacrament of the sick – where anointing cures wounds of the soul and, if appropriate in God’s plan, bodily diseases as well.

“It is necessary for him that has been baptized also to be anointed, so that by his having received chrism, that is, the anointing, he can be the anointed of God and have in himself the grace of Christ. But in turn, it is by the Eucharist that the oil with which the baptized are anointed is sanctified on the altar. He that has neither altar nor church, however, is not able to sanctify that creature, oil. Thus there can be no spiritual anointing among the heretics, since it is evident that oil cannot be sanctified nor can the Eucharist be celebrated among them at all.” [Saint Cyprian of Carthage (A.D. 254), *Letter To Januarius And Seventeen Other Bishops Of Numidia*, 70,2]