



Amos 2:4-8

TITLE

AN OUTPOST OF HEAVEN

Last time I explored how we as God's people and the church of Jesus Christ should be an outpost of heaven. We should reflect the glory and wonder of who God is. We should be bringing the values of heaven to Earth. So in the next few sermons we are going to be exploring some of the bigger social issues of our age and asking ourselves how we could bring some of the values of Heaven to Earth in an age that has seen a retreat from older values, Christian values.

The problem is that there is ample record in the last 2000 years that Christians who try to take seriously the idea of living and acting out the kingdom of God here often ending up with the reverse. They dressed up the values of Earth as the values of Heaven and brought the name of Christ into disrepute.

PICTURES

Let me give you a clue. On the left we have the Crusades – designed to capture Jerusalem and bring it under Christian rule. It commenced centuries of bloodshed in and around Palestine. Ask a Muslim what the word crusade means he will say it means bloodshed and barbarism. It's a word they use to insult westerners with. Whereas it's true that Islam has its share of barbarism, surely the whole message of the Christian faith is to reach Muslims with the Good News of Jesus Christ not kill them even though Islam is one of the worst sources of Christian persecution in the world today.

The picture on the right has a Baptist connection. It records an attempt by a group of anabaptists to bring the kingdom of God by capturing the city of Munster in 1534. Rather than bringing peace and love and Good News, it was a period of rule marked by violence and by strange new edicts by its leader Jan Matthyis who for example legalised polygamy and married 16 wives! The rebellion was put down by the Catholic bishop who ordered that the three leaders be publicly tortured, executed and their bodies hung from cages on St Lamberts Cathedral as a warning to others. Not much Christian love there either! Since then all anabaptists like Mennonites and Amish have been pacifists.

In the middle we have Northern Ireland where people justified atrocities by being Catholic or Protestant. Later in the conflict the descriptions changed to Republicans and Loyalists at the protest of the Churches who correctly stood in unity against those who used the name of Christ as a reason to commit atrocities.

The man in the middle is Joseph Kony of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda which has committed atrocities in the name of Christ in Northern Uganda as an uprising by the Acholi people against the Government. Kony has an arrest warrant out on him for crimes against humanity issued by the International Criminal Court.

No heaven on earth in any of these examples – just people exercising their prejudices and violent politics using the name of Christ to excuse the inexcusable.

Before we ever consider the whole issue of being an outpost of heaven, we must look at our own lifestyle and values and ask ourselves “is what I believe really about the word of God or about myself and the culture I've been brought up in.” Otherwise we end up like these characters – following ourselves and not living and acting in obedience to Jesus Christ.

Nowhere is this more obvious in the issue I am going to look at today and also next week in a different context that of issues of social justice.

ZECH 7:9

Social Justice. Nowhere in the Bible expresses what this is all about as in Amos. The quote in green is from Amos 5:24 *But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!* Similar words summarise the Bible well in this other quote from Zechariah which is relatively close in time to Amos. Zech 7:9 *"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Administer true justice ; show mercy and compassion to one another. 10 Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'*

This prophecy dates from about 760-755BC. The people of Israel at this time were separated into two nations. It was a time of great prosperity for Israel and Judah. There had been a few decades of political stability. Syria had been subsumed into Assyria but at that time Assyria was in its own state of flux and there was no threat to Israel and Judah who did well economically from links with their rich neighbour. They thought they had it made.

But in their prosperity they had become a very unequal society, but those that ran it seem to have had no problem with that. Likewise the majority of the population who were also doing well also weren't bothered about those at whose expense the wealth had been acquired – the poorest strata of society. It was a society where morality had been watered down to satisfy the success of the nation. Does that sound familiar. It could be Britain in 2013! In the passage we are given four things that the nation had thrown away to fund its success.

LIST

1. They watered down their faith

Israel had long since abandoned the worship of God in Jerusalem and had their own temples at Bethel and Dan. But things weren't much better in Judah. They had chosen to follow foreign gods. As I've said on previous occasions, they didn't ignore God, they just hedged their bets by indulging in other religions whilst participating in Judaism. God doesn't share His affections with lumps of wood!

Look at the parallel to today and the similarity is striking. There's been a retreat from the Christian faith, and even an antagonism towards Christians because we uphold moral values that others think OK. Morality does not have the fixed point that the Christian faith provides, but everyone does at they please – morality is decided by our culture, by social attitudes not by the word of God.

What happened to Judah? *I will send fire upon Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem.* That happened. Before any of that ever happened, the consequences of the retreat from the ways of God had already set in.

2. They exploited the weakest in society.

They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.

It was a case of exploitation on a grand scale. They cheapened the value of the poor to a pair of sandals. It would seem that the rich became rich on the back of the poor. They even made a virtue out of ripping people off: they lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines.

A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization.

~Samuel Johnson, Boswell: Life of Johnson

"Any society, any nation, is judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members ; the last, the least, the littlest."

They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Matt 25:44-45

An outrage? Of course it was. One of the biggest undercurrents in our own society has been the feeling over the past 5 years or so that people at the lowest end of society have suffered whilst the people who were most responsible for the economic crash that caused all the problems have so far got away with it. In our country today there is a real sense of disillusionment that our politicians have failed us and are failing us in coming to grips with the present crisis. It's not even party political as the failure has been over all three parties. We'll see in a moment that it's Christians that are in the forefront of bringing some honesty to the situation.

3. They tolerated sexual immorality

Verse 7 *Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name.* Just one example of the sexual immorality that was occurring in that country at the time. We also live in a society where sex dominates. Casual sexual activity is a characteristic of our younger generation. Marriage has declined and the whole concept of commitment within it has gone. Adultery is common. Then there is the issue of homosexuality.

Of course we Christians are told we are old fashioned, out of touch, fuddy-duddies. Then of course we see how people lament about unwanted pregnancies, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, the pain of relationship breakups, the decline of family life, dis-functionality in families and all the rest of it and they wonder why. And they don't like the answer when we give it to them!

4. They promoted injustice

They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. It was a world where the rich got what they wanted. It was a corrupt society where people who could buy their justice got what they wanted.

Over the past few years we have been disturbed by the grand corruption by individuals and companies once respected – be that MPs or Banks. And most of them seem to have

got away with it. There's been a few scapegoats, but everyone knows the problems were much wider and haven't really been dealt with.

Why should we make these parallels – because nations that indulge in this kind of stuff don't last. Israel and Judah didn't. Israel and Judah were specifically prophesied against, but just because we haven't doesn't mean that bad things aren't going to happen – we are seeing the breakdown of our economy, our way of life, or national morals – and it can be traced back to our nation's departure from God and the word of God. As a nation we've shot ourselves – it doesn't need God to put another bullet into us – but He's the only One who can save it.

WHAT SHALL WE DO ABOUT IT?

1. Repent

When we see things happening in our society which were described in the OT as abhorrent to God, then we as His people need to repent – turn around and go in God's direction, walk with Christ. We should be people like the prophets and like Jesus who wept for their nations and cities.

2. Pray and Act.

Then we should pray. There are already countless groups up and down the country that do this regularly. We need to be part of this movement. We need to spend time before God, join with others, act with others to call for a new move of the Spirit of God in our land.

One piece of action we as God's people need to bring is truth. Part of the failure of our traditional parties to act is that they are so grounded in their dogma, political philosophies and sometimes their own rhetoric that they fail to recognise truth and act on it. It's remarkable that it's taken 5 years for someone to produce a report that says the Government should recognise and prosecute bankers who broke the law. Five years to say something that most ordinary people have said all along.

JPIT

At the forefront of exposing truth and getting politicians to recognise truth and act on it have been Christians. A couple of months back now an organisation called JPIT which is a project of Baptists Methodists and URC produced a report looking at the statements that the press and politicians make about the poor. The welfare budget has been the target for cuts over the past couple of years. Why should the public support lazy people who don't want to work. We need to save money by only giving benefits to the deserving poor – people who want to work. Seems like a good idea, but JPIT exposed is that the ability to save money on welfare is very limited because there aren't many deserving poor out there and the people being most hurt are those in low paid jobs! Cuts in welfare are hurting the poorest and most vulnerable people in society, whilst leaving the most prosperous almost untouched.

SLIDES

Look carefully at what you are told about the poor. Most of it just isn't true – particularly if you read it in a newspaper. Yes, there are people who abuse the system – less than 1%, but there is real hardship and we are starting to see evidence of poverty that has not been seen for decades which has seen the return of street homelessness and food banks. If it wasn't for the generosity of ordinary people we would be seeing worse things.

Strangely, only a few of the respectable quality papers published the JPIT findings. What has helped define this nation is something that Christians helped to bring to it and that's to be a compassionate society and that compassion should be built into our society.

WHAT SHALL WE DO ABOUT IT?

3. Proclaim Good News

Fundamentally we are here to proclaim Good News. Our lives, our speech should proclaim Jesus. So always look for truth because much of what is said about the poor of our society is not true. That's why we should always speak for justice even if the party we vote for or support doesn't hold to it. MPs with a conscience do even if it isn't their party line.

So what do we do? Never hesitate to try to discover the truth. Pray for revival. Take every opportunity to do good. I know most of you do.

*Preached by Mark Reid
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