

Earth's Desire

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 3 September 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Season of Creation 1A

Contemporary Reading: "Earth's Desire" by Thomas Berry; Amos 5: 21-24

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

'Let justice flow like a river' is the central theme of this year's global ecumenical Season of Creation. This phrase comes from the book of Amos, chapter 5, part of which we heard just now. Let us hear how this speaks powerfully today and why people of faith are called to work and pray together....

Video 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PPyobDnGP4>

'Let justice roll down like a river': these words come alive for us today. Originally, they come from the prophet Amos, who lived in the 8th century before Jesus. They are part of his denunciation of the then northern kingdom of Israel, but they have been applicable since to many contexts of injustice and sacred betrayal. Martin Luther King, for example, quoted these words in his famous *'I Have A Dream'* speech. For whilst not all of Amos' phraseology and underlying worldview is entirely straightforward for us, it is hard not to be moved by the enduring significance of his cries: firstly about justice; secondly, about the sovereignty of God; and, thirdly, about the consequent 'judgement' which results from their neglect. These are key theological themes for our own times, not least in their environmental challenges. As we begin this Season of Creation, let us therefore open these out for further reflection.

Firstly, Amos seeks to re-centre us on justice at the heart of God. Note well: this is not encouraging people of faith to throw away developing either good doctrine, or healthy spiritual practices. The Season of Creation is not only about Christians jumping on the environmental bandwagon, as if it is the only thing that matters. It is rather about recovering the intimate relationship between God and all that exists. In that sense, it is also about a call to healthy, renewing, worship and teaching, as well as about 'saving the planet', or other good works. For when Amos attacked the worship of his day, he was not doing so because such things in themselves do not please God, but because good worship and good understanding of God are intimately entwined with sharing in justice. What is at stake here is relationship.

In this month's Tuesday evening study series *'Reading the Bible with Ecological Eyes'*, I want to invite us into deeper reflection upon the nature of divine relationship with Creation as the heart of this Season. For, as Amos affirms, justice – for human beings, or for the planet – is not an extra, or an alternative, to true worship and understanding of God. Rather, it is intimately interconnected. One helpful way to look at this is through the repeated divine refrain of the Hebrew Scriptures, where God says to the people of Israel: *'you shall dwell in the land I gave your forebears, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.'*

Land – People – God: these three elements sit together, biblically speaking, and, if you mess up one, you mess up the others. Where people ignore the sacred, they and the land suffer. Where people only care for what they call God, ignoring land, they and the land suffer. Where people are ignored by others who care only for ‘their’ land, and ‘their’ gods, the land, and everyone, suffers. Like other biblical prophets, says Amos, we only find flourishing, for people and land, when we are in right relationship with God.

This brings us, secondly, to the sovereignty of the God of Israel. For, let us be honest, in Amos, and elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, we have a call to honour the particularity of the God of biblical tradition. For, in Amos, and in chapter 5 itself, the prophet speaks out against the syncretistic worship and theologies which have developed among God’s people. As moderns, we may be understandably resistant to this. After all, we may reasonably say, *do not many other spiritual, and even quite secular, wisdom traditions have something to share to help renew our relationship with God and God’s Creation?* Yes, they do. However, Amos challenges us not to be indiscriminate about our worship, and our theologies. Rather, he encourages us to assess how far anything in our many faiths and cultures reflects the heart of God and contributes to renewing the God-Land–People relationship.

This leads us, thirdly, to what is traditionally called the ‘judgement’ of God of which the prophet speaks. Amos is quite clear, not least in verse 20 of chapter 5: *‘Truly the day of the Lord will be darkness, not light, gloom without any brightness!’* Well, there is almost certainly some hyperbole here, and heightened language for dramatic effect! Yet Amos is surely right. As I said earlier, where the relationship of God-Land-People is not healthy, there are consequences. The chickens come home to roost, we might say: or, in more contemporary terms, the birds come home to rest, only to find that climate change has robbed them of their food and habitats; or the penguins and polar bears come home to breed, only to find the ground, the ice, literally melting beneath them. What the ancients called *‘the judgement of God’* we might understand in more scientific terms. Yet it is deeply real. Unless, in spiritual and theological terms, we repent – that is, unless we change our ways of thinking and behaving: unless we renew true relationship, between the sacred-the land-and people, suffering will continue.

Amos was primarily concerned with expressing that message. In this, we should note the significance of him being a sheep herder and a sycamore fig farmer: not, by background, a prophet, or a priest, or any other kind of religious figure. Instead, he was driven to speak out by the consequences of injustice and false, distracting, religion. Very likely such consequences were also environmental, including driving of people like him from their homes and, now, impossible livelihoods. Indeed, not for nothing does the book of Amos mention an earthquake at its beginning: a symbolic expression of the challenge of Amos’ own ministry and the holistic nature of divine salvation.

Who then is Amos for us today? Are our ears open to the cries of pain from similar people sharing Earth’s sufferings? We too, whoever we are, are also called to be prophets, like Amos, in our own way: speaking of the realities of justice at the heart of God, and of God’s intimate relationship with Land and People, with all that exists.

This brings us, in conclusion, to desire: what the brilliant Catholic priest and 'geologist' Thomas Berry called '*Earth's Desire*', in that poem¹ we also heard earlier. What Berry was saying was that we need to approach ecological relationship (God-Land-People) in terms of love, and desire, not simply justice. This complements the overall biblical picture of God which we find in the prophets' expressions of anger and longing for justice. For such anger and the call to justice flow out of love, the divine love at the heart of all existence.

We might not speak of 'judgement' in quite the same ways as the ancients, but it is the consequence of not honouring this sacred love at the heart of all things. The remedy then, as Berry encourages us, with the best of the Bible, is to grow in love, beginning with opening ourselves afresh to the love of God in Creation, sharing in Earth's, and God's, Desire.

Again, this brings us back to a renewed understanding of God, as well as of God's wider Creation, and it brings us back also to healthy worship and spiritual practices. It is from these, in renewing our mutual love and desire with Earth and God, said Thomas Berry, that we shall best grow in understanding and in the bearing of justice for all Creation.

For human beings only really love that in which they are in relationship. I hope therefore that this is what this Season of Creation can enable for us, and, to take the next step, I invite you to share in reflection now upon often 'unseen wonders' of the love and beauty of Creation...

Video 2 https://youtu.be/_sHRVfc-zYo

¹ <https://thomasberry.org/earths-desire/>