

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon – 6th Sunday after Trinity

11th July 2021

Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

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What sells papers – and for that matter films, TV series and books? Royalty, sex and religion, preferably all three together! How many of us have followed the saga of Prince Harry and his wife falling out with their respective families so very publicly, dishing the so called dirt on worldwide TV with their interview with Oprah Winfrey? The Duchess of Cambridge only has to wear a dress from a high street shop for it to sell out immediately. Millions of us avidly watch these big occasions put on with all the pageantry which Britain seems to be so good at. Weddings, funerals – like Prince Phillip's simple and moving ceremony so recently – and coronations.

People haven't changed in the last 3000 years – the lives of the rich and powerful are fascinating to people who are neither rich nor powerful. I'm not sure why – is it the fairy tale aspect, the sight of so much beauty unattainable to most of us? But they are people at the end of the day and things go wrong for them as much as they do for the rest of us – divorces, deaths, family rows, and being so famous, their mistakes and problems are so much better known and gossiped about. No different now than to the time of Amos or John the Baptist.

Amos is an interesting figure from the Old Testament of around 753 BC. Unlike most of the other prophets he seems to have popped up into the limelight, issued stern warnings to the population about mending their immoral ways, and then disappeared again, back to his life as a farmer after just a year. He wasn't as it were a professional prophet, didn't get paid, just obeyed the will of God for a

short space of time to go and warn people they were on a rocky road to destruction. He was certainly well educated, and well aware of Israel's heritage and its contemporary political and economic circumstances. He has inspired many social reformers – Dr Martín Luther King for example, used Amos as a base for his own preaching calling for civil rights in the 1950's and 60's in America.

At the time, Israel was enjoying a time of peace and prosperity. But the trouble was that the rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer. Those in power trampled all over those who weren't. Material things were prized more than anything else, and it was thought that if you were rich, it was a sign of God's favour. The elite were corrupt and immoral, appearances mattering more than substance, and people were more interested in partying than social justice. They forgot that all people are God's creation in his likeness. They used and abused those less powerful than them, especially women and children and the poor. They paid lip service to God's requirement that service to him is shown through service to others, that faith should be shown in practical caring for others and God's creation. God wants action, not just words. Amos was telling these people that all parties come to an end and theirs would very soon if they didn't sort themselves out – they would lose their power, their lovely houses, jewellery and fine clothes, and be led away into captivity by another nation (elsewhere he puts it graphically as “led away like fish, with a hook through their nose”.)

And of course, as usual, no-one much took notice of Amos and there was indeed an invasion, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of Israel taken captive.

If we come forwards in time, 750 years, have things changed? No not really. The last of the prophets, John the Baptist, is still telling everyone they must change, go back to true worship of God, live their lives how God has commanded them to do – because they weren't. Israel is under enemy occupation, and the people, especially the rich and powerful, are once again setting a bad example. In particular the ruler of Galilee and Perea, Herod Antipas, had divorced his wife and married his sister-in-law – who had also divorced her husband, Herod's half-brother. This was offensive on many levels to the Jews. They viewed it as adultery and as breaking the law on not marrying the wife of a brother. John the Baptist spoke out against it and was put into prison. Herod was afraid the very popular

John would lead a revolt against him. Herod it appears is none the less fascinated by John – afraid of what he might do but also wanting to talk to him, recognising him for a good and holy man. But - Herod is, like his predecessors in Amos's time, also it appears one for parties, eating, drinking and goodness knows what else, including the famous dance by the young girl. Hollywood has taken to this story as it has all the salacious details one could wish for to sell a film – the drunken party, watching the daughter of Herod's wife performing a dance which pleased them all – often known as the dance of the 7 veils. I'm not sure where that came from as it's not in my bible but let's not spoil a good story.

In his highly overexcited state, and showing off to his rich friends and colleagues, Herod promises to give the girl whatever she asks for, and her mother, who hates John for speaking up against her and her lifestyle, tells her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Herod is too weak, too afraid, to be seen to backtrack on his promise and so came the untimely death in a prison cell of the last of the prophets, a good and holy man, thanks to the spite of a rich woman.

So what do we make of these stories? What relevance do they have to us, 2000 years on? Has anything changed? In our world, are the rich getting richer whilst the poor are getting poorer? A recent report from Oxfam states "the 1000 richest people on the planet recouped their Covid 19 losses in just 9 months, but it could take more than a decade for the world's poorest to recover from the economic effects of the pandemic..... rising inequality means that it could take 14 times longer for the number of people living in poverty to return to pre-pandemic levels than it took for the fortunes of the top 1000, mostly white male, billionaires to bounce back... the world's 10 richest men have seen their combined wealth increase by half a trillion dollars since the pandemic began – more than enough to pay for a Covid vaccine for everyone and to ensure no-one is pushed into poverty by the pandemic.....the worst job crisis in 90 years with hundreds of millions of people now underemployed or out of work. Women are hardest hit - 112 million at high risk of losing their jobs. 22,000 black and Hispanic people would still be alive in the United States if they experienced the same mortality rates as their white counterparts. Infection and mortality rates are higher in poorer areas of countries such as France, India and Spain whilst England's poorest regions experience mortality rates double that of the richest areas. Our back yard!

People still traffic women and children, abuse others because they are a different colour, race, religion, sexuality or whatever, people still have no clean water or enough food to eat in so many places. Violence, poverty and neglect stalk the world. Too many have no work, no self-respect, no homes. It's a sad and sorry state of affairs.

But one thing has changed. At the time John the Baptist died, there was another young man around who would change the world – Jesus Christ. Let's not forget that we are the body of Christ – it's our hands, minds, bodies, that do his work here and now – so let's do our bit to improve the lot of those less fortunate than ourselves. Let's donate to charity, let's put pressure on our politicians to make change – inequality isn't inevitable, it's a policy choice by governments whom we elect. We don't need another Amos or John the Baptist to tell us what's wrong, with the media nowadays we can see it for ourselves. If we all do just a little, together we can change the world. Let's all do God's work.

Amen.