
The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD,
when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the LORD.

Amos 8:11

A story is told of a politician some time ago from a country area on the campaign trail, and along the way he met up with an angry crowd at some meeting. About half way through a speech he made at this meeting he was pelted with tomatoes and over ripe fruit. In response, the politician had the presence of mind to wipe the food off his face and to say with a wry grin, “My critics may think I don’t know much about farm problems – but they’ll have to admit I’m a big help with the oversupply problem.” You might have heard of similar stories.

In our world, at this time, we are witnessing again many political uncertainties. Who will become the next Prime Minister of the United Kingdom? What will happen in Sri Lanka? What will happen in Ukraine and Russia? What’s happening in many countries across the African continent? What does the future hold for the world economy? What does the future hold for the Australian economy? How will this affect us? What about the emerging food crisis, here many people in the world are struggling to have enough food to eat. And in all this we may ask of our own lives, “What does ‘the future’ hold?” If there is one certainty about ‘world history’ is that, whenever it seems like we might be finding some ‘stability’ and ‘recovery’, things just seem to get bad all over again. And so we may ask, what does the future hold? Are you anxious about the future?

However, one of the things we can learn from the First Bible for today (Amos 8:1-12) is that we can often be focused on the wrong things. We can be distracted by the wrong stuff. We can be grounded in a wrong set of values. And it can happen so easily and subtly. And it can happen also because our human nature is such is that we would rather listen to our own flesh (to ‘be happy’ to ‘get what we want), rather than listen to the Spirit and the Word of God.

In our first Bible Reading for today, which takes us back to the 8th century before Christ, in the northern kingdom of Israel; the prophet Amos is given a vision of ripe fruit in a basket. The LORD asked him what he saw. Amos told Him and then the LORD responds by saying: “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.” The ripe fruit basket then becomes a visible symbol of Israel’s imminent downfall.

Amos goes on to warn the people of Israel that temple songs of joy will become songs of wailing. His was a word of doom and gloom. And, I'm sure it was a message that many didn't want to hear! They also most likely found it a hard to believe. Why? Because they were enjoying the good life: the economy was booming; everyone was prospering.

But Amos was sent by GOD to speak out against the Israelites. He told them: "you trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land." Amos said they could not wait for worship to be over so that they could open up their shady businesses and make more money. Even though they went to the worship services—it was all a big lie. Their hearts and minds were not focussed on God and His ways. On the 'outside' everything looked 'right, but on the inside they were soft like overripe fruit....

In response God sent Amos with this message that "the piper would be paid," Israel would fall and end up being taken into exile. The message even gets worse before it gets better—the LORD will cause them to be in mourning as if they lost an only son. This time of mourning will be like a great famine. Only this famine will be a spiritual one; they shall seeking all over for the word of the LORD; they shall hunger and thirst for it without finding it.

Someone has once said that there is an important spiritual principle that can make a difference in our life and faith that can be expressed by saying, "*We need to pay close attention to the things God pays close attention to.*" (repeat). This probably sounds like a statement of the obvious, but our culture does not want to keep a watchful eye on the things God keeps a watchful eye on. Perhaps it is human nature to drift into self centred living when life is good and we are free from troubles. It's easy to be distracted from God's word....

We need to pay close attention to the things God pays close attention to. Our world need to hear God's Word. So, let's think again about Amos's time.... What did Amos say? Amos said, "The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD." At one level, we may simplistically seek to apply this to the world in which we live and say that not many people are reading, listening, and living according to God's Word (the Bible). But we are to look beyond an approach that subtly judges others, and to reflect on our own lives and souls.

At times in our life we may feel a 'hunger', and here we are not speaking about a physical hunger. Have you ever 'felt down' and wanted a 'pick me up'? Have you ever wanted some guidance or direction for life? Have you ever wanted a word of hope in a dark or difficult situation? Have you ever wished that 'others' in 'the world' knew better what was 'right' and what was 'wrong'? And how has hearing God's word (reading the Bible, having devotions, listening to sermons, being with other wise Christians) helped you? Can you think of such times?

Amos 8:11 is a warning and reminder to us to read the Bible (and to rejoice in the reading and reflection on God's word in worship, as well as in family or personal devotion) to receive comfort, guidance and hope for life. And, as our Lord Jesus says (John 6:63), "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are life."

There is a call in the First Reading for today that reminds us that we need to hear the word of God: like the people of the Old Testament we cannot survive without the word. This message from Amos may come as a gentle reminder, or as a stern warning. Only you can be the judge of that. However it comes to you -- isn't it wonderful to be able to come together to worship and to hear from God and to ask that our may be given shape according to the Word of life He has given us in Jesus.

The prophet Amos was given a difficult word to share. He said, "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. 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." (Amos 8:11-12)

This is sobering stuff. Just think about it... Just think about this world with all the crazy stuff that seems to be happening (and maybe the crazy stuff going on in your life, or in the life of people around you). And then think about the possibility of having no word from God about who He is, how to know Him, and about hope that we have as we look to the future. Can you imagine this? What do you think it would be like to not know Jesus, and to not have His Word to guide us and give us true hope? What do you think 'life' would be like if you had never heard God's word?

We could take a simplistic approach to this Bible Reading (Amos 8:1-12) and speak about what we see as the 'sin' and 'wickedness' in 'the world', and how it does seem like there is a famine of God's word in our land. And, undoubtedly, this is true. But there is a personal word from a loving God that is here for you. This word of Amos is not just about judgement. It is also about salvation.

The same God who demands change also promises to make change possible. "A harvest is appointed when I would restore the fortunes of my people, when I would heal Israel" (Hosea 6:11-7:1). The Prophets carry a fundamental optimism that God is active in the world to change it for the better. Despite the apparent triumph of the wicked, God is ultimately in charge, and "the kingdom shall be the Lord's" (Obadiah 21). Despite the calamity the people are bringing upon themselves, God is at work to restore the goodness of life and work that He intended from the beginning. "He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13).

Later in Amos' prophecy we hear God say (Amos 9:14): "I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit." God's word to His people in times of hardship is to restore.

It is fascinating, but there are echoes of Amos' word (Amos 8:9: "I will darken the earth in broad daylight") in Luke's description of Jesus' death (Luke 23:44-45): "By this time it was noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn down the middle." In this moment of 'the ripening of the sins of the world', the Lord's mercy triumphs.

Jesus provides a feast for you, a banquet of truth for our nourishment and strength. Every day, we need spiritual food to strengthen us to faithfully follow Jesus as we abide in Him. Jesus said that He is the bread of life (John 6:35). He is the bread from heaven who provides satisfaction and life! And Jesus has given us Himself. He has given us His Word. We have many needs as believers—water, oxygen, food, shelter. Yet the greatest need we have is for life with Christ. Jesus is the living bread that came down from heaven.

We all have hearts that are hungry for something. For example, I have come across a few authors who say that every person is looking for answers to three fundamental questions: Who am I? Where do I fit? What am I here for? These questions of identity, belonging and purpose can be thought of as hungers we have. We can also be hungry for things like acceptance, self-worth, peace, rest, hope, and the list goes on. Whatever our deeper hunger might be, Jesus feeds us through the power of his Spirit through the gospel.

Jesus accepts us just as we are as a free act of grace. Jesus gives us value by telling us we're worth dying for by giving His life for us on the cross. Jesus gives us peace as He establishes a new relationship between us, our heavenly Father, and each other. Whatever our longings and cravings may be, God understands our innermost needs and desires.

Let us count on His promises. Let us have faith. Let us feast on the Bread of Life. And let us praise God for His gracious provisions. Jesus is the Bread of Life, and no matter what else is going on in the world, if you have Him, then you have everything, all that you need.

May Jesus our Bread of Life, who has the words of eternal life, keep us in faith with Him and in love toward one another. Amen.