

E100 Block 10.1 - The Prophets - Intro. G & B -- May 2011

Amos 5: 10-15 , James 4:13 to 5:6

Introduction

In our trip through the Bible,

Today we begin the final two week block of the old Testament section.

Congratulations. 10 of the 20 finished

- we start the New Testament after Pentecost. (1 Weeks rest)

So the final block in the Old Testament is entitled " The Prophets"

In the Old Testament we read that for about 500 years God sent prophets to the people of Israel.

There are altogether 16 books of prophetic writing .

You can sort them in different ways. The first four are usually called "The Major Prophets" -- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel - large books (Isaiah 66 chapters). The remaining 12 are called the "Minor Prophets".

(Pushed together at the end of the OT)

More usefully is to sort them according to times when they lived.

Earlier -- ministered to the two kingdoms of the Israelites -- the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom -- before these kingdoms were destroyed. Later -- ministered to the remnant of the Jews after the destruction of Judah & Jerusalem and carrying away of the people into exile in Babylon.

They had different messages -- today we are looking at the earlier prophets.

What was their job specification -- these prophets?

To warn -- both the people and the rulers of the land.

They warned them about turning away from God -- both in their religion, but also in their behaviour (usually one follows the other - expand).

The last days of the northern kingdom was surprisingly a time of great prosperity. The Israelites had defeated Syria and taken over that land -- even as far north as the capital of Damascus.

Israel now controlled the important trade routes of the ancient world.

These revenues made them rich, -- but the wealth was distributed unequally.

The nobles and the new merchant class kept the wealth for themselves.

They demanded luxury goods and residences, while at the same time laying heavier taxes on the workers.

The wealthy became land hungry, forcing out the small farmers.

Unjust weights were used to measure out purchases - and cheat people.

The justice system itself was failing with judges favouring the rich.

The old middle-class began to disappear and society was increasingly divided into the oppressed poor and the very rich.

The heartlessness of the rich is well illustrated in one angry charge made by the prophet Amos -- "*you people are willing to sell the needy for a pair of sandals*". Cheap luxury footwear meant more to the wealthy than did the suffering of their fellow human beings.

Religiously, economically, and socially, Israel had become an unjust society.

The prophets sent to the southern kingdom of Judah also saw the same things happening there, and echoed the call for true justice.

Both kingdoms failed to heed the call and eventually, even though they were his own people, God's judgment fell on those nations. The Northern Kingdom fell to the cruel Assyrian Empire in 721 BC. The prosperous land was devastated and the people carried off to other conquered countries and mixed with their populations.

The Southern Kingdom fared slightly better. One or two of their kings had turned the people back to God -- but they were generally going against the trend. Finally God allowed the Babylonian empire to conquer the land. After a long siege, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC, and all except the very poorest were taken into exile in Babylon.

Justice and concern for the poor was very much on God's heart - it was throughout the Old Testament one of the major repeated themes. And not just the Old Testament. I don't often quote the pop group U2 -- but here is a quote by Bono -- U2's lead singer -- "the only time Christ is judgemental is on the subject of the poor -- as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me".

Our God is still concerned for justice and the poor. - but if the prophet Amos were to come to our world today, wouldn't he be making the same accusations as he did then?

There are now as many people in our world suffering from eating too much (one billion) as there are people on the verge of starvation (800 million). We maintain our luxury lifestyles by paying the poor in other countries very little for their goods and labour. Rich people can buy "super injunctions" giving them the right in law to gag the media over reporting their misdemeanours. We artificially boost the cost of basic foods by trading them on the commodities markets, thus making

profits for the dealers but leaving them too expensive for the poor to buy enough to feed themselves. We raise trade barriers to protect our industries while telling the poor countries they must not do the same but allow our imports in unfettered. Examples could go on forever.

But it's difficult isn't it -- we are locked into a world system which abuses the poor people -- that is those with little access to water, education, food, and medical aid. But we're not the Prime Minister, or President Obama, -- so what on earth can we do? (Pause)

1. First we can decide not to bury our heads in the sand and go with the flow. We can(should) take an interest in these big issues -- and at the very least pray. Some of us may be in positions where we can lobby our politicians or people in positions of power.

2. Secondly -- there are lots of little things we can all do. The most obvious is to refuse to support those companies that are providing us with cheap goods at the expense of people in other countries. Clothing, but even more significantly food. We can choose to buy fair traded goods.

Yes, it will cost you more if you decide not to join in the exploitation of the poor. (pause)

Okay -- put the extra cost down as part of your giving to charity if that will persuade you. There is a whole range of fair traded foods -- as Christians we have no excuse.

ASK THEM FOR THEIR IDEAS. -

Conclusion

The Jews were God's own people -- yet he judged them for their failure to treat their fellow human beings fairly. Can Christians in this country in the West pretend that we will be exempt from God's judgment if we continue to ignore the plight of the world's poor? (and they don't want our charity they just want fairness and justice)

Prayer - *"And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (The prophet Micah 6:8)*