

Mark 6.14-29; Amos 7.7-15; Psalm 85.8-end; Eph.s 1.3-14.
11th July 2021, 9am Said Svc. & 10:30am zoomed church
6th Sunday after Trinity.

Our readings today are all about the contrast between worldly power and religious poverty; between the immoral life of the king and the righteous, pathetic life of the prophet; and between the luxury of the palace and the barrenness of the prison cell.

Nowadays, we have spirit levels to make sure our DIY projects are in line, while surveyors use laser beams to check dimensions. What all these devices do is measure something against something else. In the case of Amos' vision of God, the Lord is the builder, measuring Israel to see whether she meets with approval. Even though God shows mercy, we are also accountable to him.

This is not about 'measuring up' to standards, but balancing what we do against God and God alone. This is hard in a world where **relativism** holds sway – the notion that all points of view are equally valid, and that all truth is relative only to the individual. In such a world we just measure ourselves against ourselves, and define our morality against ourselves. For God, having a line – a plumbline or any other measuring line – means that there is a clear marker, one that we don't write ourselves, but that God has written.

Tim Sledge, the Vicar of Romsey Abbey, thinks of this line not as a long plumbline, but as the line around the heart of God – a God who continually shows mercy. When we cause God grief, it is not just that our line does not measure up to God, but that it breaks the heart of God, who is still seeking to align his heart to ours.

The Christian author of Ephesians has the opening blessing, or act of praise expressed to God, centred on Christ. God is no longer just 'O Lord our God, King of the Universe', but 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. The blessings for which God is blessed are those that Christians have received through the words and works of Jesus: 'adoption as his children', redemption, forgiveness, grace, knowledge of 'the mystery of his will'. And – supremely – 'an inheritance', which is pledged by his mark, the 'seal' of his Spirit.

Thinking again of the modern tendency to relativism, everyone sees God from somewhere. For the Jews, God is seen mainly from the vantage point provided by the shape of their history; Christians, however, claim that the best views are to be had when they stand within the pattern of their Christ (Jeff Astley).

Our Gospel reading includes the haunting image of a young woman carrying a human head on a platter and giving it to her mother. This striking example of further contrasts, like those identified in Amos, between the worldly power (of Herod Antipas) and the religious poverty (of John the Baptist); between the immoral life of the king, and the righteous, ascetic life of the prophet; and between the luxury of the palace and the barrenness of the prison cell.

Within the story of John the Baptist execution, there are strong links with Jesus' own death: both Jesus and John was subject to despotic injustice; both were tried by men who found them deeply perplexing. Herod knew in his heart of hearts that John the Baptist was 'a

righteous and holy man'. Pontius Pilate said of Jesus at the trial: 'I find no case against him' (John 18.38).

The contrasts inside these stories and the links with Jesus' own life 'outside' the story give these episodes their power and fascination. When the overarching hubris, vanity and amorality of Herod are confronted by an ascetic, self-forgetful and righteous prophet, the stage is set for a tragic confrontation. When the Herods of today murder the John the Baptists of today, is it not the duty of Christians to protest – and to work for a world where, instead of brutality, the watchwords become repentance and reconciliation? (Christopher Herbert).

Spoken in the name of

Psalm 85.8-end

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Amos 7.7-15

7 This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. ⁸And the Lord said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb-line.' Then the Lord said,

'See, I am setting a plumb-line

in the midst of my people Israel;

I will never again pass them by;

⁹ the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,

and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.'

10 Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said,

"Jeroboam shall die by the sword,

and Israel must go into exile

away from his land." '

¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, 'O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread

there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.'

¹⁴ Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am* no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am* a herdsman, and a dresser of sycomore trees, ¹⁵and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."

⁸ Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.*

⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹² The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Ephesians 1.3-14

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,⁴ just as he chose us in Christ* before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,* having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this* is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Mark 6.14-29 - The Death of John the Baptist

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus'* name had become known. Some were* saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' ¹⁵But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It

is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod* had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed;* and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias* came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' ²³And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' ²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's* head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.