



Seeking Shalom

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Israel learned a hard lesson through the prophet Amos. What about us? Are we living up to our vocation?

BY DONALD E. BURKE

The prophet Amos lived in the eighth century BC, a time when some Israelites lived in extreme affluence, while the vast majority lived in extreme poverty. A short drought, an insect infestation in the fields or a natural disaster could lead to famine and starvation. Food security was reserved for the wealthy.

This was not the way Israel was supposed to live. Rooted in its covenant with God, Israel's vocation was to be a different kind of community: one in which love for God was expressed in love for fellow Israelites and neighbours. They were to work together to ensure they never again experienced the kind of injustice and oppression that had crushed their ancestors in Egypt centuries earlier.

But in its rush to be like other nations, by having a king—reflecting a lack of trust in God as their king—Israel had lost sight of its mission. With the concentra-

tion of power and wealth in the hands of a few, community gave way to self-interest. Poorer Israelites were pushed aside. Laws that should have corrected abuses instead became instruments of injustice. Perjury became the norm. Corruption was rampant.

Against this backdrop, Amos spoke out, proclaiming that Israel had relinquished its covenant as the people of God. As God declared through Amos, “The end has come upon my people Israel” (Amos 8:2 *NRSV*). This was not something God desired. It was simply a consequence of Israel's abandonment of its vocation to be a community that cultivated the *shalom*—the well-being and flourishing—of all.

Justice and Righteousness

Through Amos, God called for justice and righteousness as the true expression of his covenant relationship with

Israel. “Justice” referred primarily to the integrity of the legal system to settle claims and offences in a way that would promote *shalom*. It was not about a desire for revenge or dishing out retribution. Justice is concerned with promoting the wholeness, the well-being of the community—especially for the most vulnerable. Justice itself was not the goal, but it pointed toward the goal of God's covenant with Israel—*shalom*.

“Righteousness,” on the other hand, referred to fulfilling the obligations of a relationship. It meant being our brothers' and sisters' keeper (see Genesis 4:9). When we ignore the needs of our sisters and brothers, the fabric of our community is torn.

But describing this ideal community wasn't Amos' main task—that was left to others, such as Isaiah. Amos was called to something more modest: to diagnose the terminal illness that was sapping the

life out of Israel. His task was to shock Israel to its senses, much like a defibrillator shocks a malfunctioning heart into the proper rhythm.

As it turned out, the patient—Israel—was too far gone. All that was left was to pronounce Israel dead (see Amos 8:2-3) and to sing the funeral song (see Amos 5:1-3). It was a hard message to deliver and Amos is a hard book to read, especially for Christians who want to hear only words of comfort and affirmation.

Salt and Light

So why should we read the Book of Amos? Why should the words of this prophet matter to the church? Simply put, because the church's relationship with God is fundamentally the same as Israel's relationship with God. We are called into a covenant with God through Jesus Christ—a covenant offered in grace, but one that requires a faithful human response.

What kind of response is required? When an expert in the law asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment, he responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39 *NRSV*). Jesus did not create this two-fold commandment—it is found in the Old Testament and is a basic statement of the covenant relationship between God and Israel (see Deuteronomy 6:5;

Leviticus 19:18). Undivided, uncompromising and thoroughgoing love for God, coupled with deep love for our neighbours, expressed in our pursuit of their *shalom*, is the essential statement of biblical Christianity.

The church—as Israel was before us—is called into existence to be a community in which love for God and love for neighbours are the hallmarks of our life

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together. We are called to be a community of contrast. When Christians live out this vocation, the church is salt and light in the world. But too often, in our rush to be like the world—and to be liked by the world—we adopt the world's values. We accept the consignment of so many to poverty and the margins of society, as though this is the only possibility.

But the prophet Amos reminds us—as he reminded Israel—that in

these circumstances, we, too, fall short of fulfilling our vocation to love God and love our neighbour. We forget that in the language of the Bible, love is not a fleeting and fickle emotion. Rather, love demonstrates a deep commitment through acts of loyalty, faithfulness and care. Love for God and for neighbour is expressed most clearly when we couple our devotion to God with our devotion to our neighbour's *shalom*.

A Warning

The Book of Amos does not present us with the entire biblical message. No single book of the Bible does. But it does provide us with a serious warning about our complacency when we separate our religious practices from how we actually live our lives. Sham worship is offensive to God if we do not work toward the *shalom* of our neighbours and neighbourhoods. It's one thing to sing praises to God, but they ring hollow when our neighbours are hungry and homeless.

If we read the Bible only for comfort, then we will probably set aside the Book of Amos. But as Israel learned the hard way, ignoring Amos will not alter God's message or its potency—it will lead only to a famine of hearing the words of the Lord (see Amos 8:11-12). That's a famine we want to avoid. ☹

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This is the second of a two-part article.

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