

Beyond the rules

Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

It has been another blistering week in British politics. The ongoing internal strife in the Conservative and Labour parties, the continuing fall-out over Brexit and the seemingly endless resignations – all of this was added to by the findings of the Chilcott report.

The prophet Amos, who never felt he was a prophet but simply a countryman who looked after his flocks and tended his trees, wrote in challenging times for his nation. A divided nation, yet indifferent, led by corrupt rulers who did not feel they were accountable to anyone, and certainly not God. “Prophecy is the gifted ability to see what other people cannot or will not see. Prophets focus primarily on the moral and spiritual condition of a nation; they do not simply predict future events, but warn of consequences of injustice.”ⁱ

With the image of a plumb line measuring a faulty wall, Amos draws for us a pointed image for his complacent nation’s predicament. In what was a time of relative peace and prosperity, the plumb line held in the hand of God illustrated a fatal flaw in the community’s structure; it had come out of ‘true’ with itself. A plumb line is a very simple tool – a weight affixed to a length of string and used to construct a wall. Reliant on gravity, it gives the builder a true measure of that which is straight, and its usage is crucial if the structure is to be strong and enduring.

God’s plumb line is the measuring line that shows whether or not God’s people are in line with God’s ways. It implies that faulty construction will be torn down. We may be uncomfortable at the concept of the judgement of God. Many people have nothing to do with faith because they ask the question, ‘Who are you to judge me?’ They feel that God, and God’s Church, are too judgemental. Yet judgement, God’s, ours, is based upon what we believe to be right and wrong, and how we live up to the standards of goodness, decency, honesty, compassion, inclusion, mercy, and love.

If that plumb line were held against the political leadership and decision making processes of our country today, over Brexit, over the decision to go to war in Iraq, what would it tell us? In

one of the most uncomfortable radio interviews I have heard in a long time, the Radio 4 presenter John Humphrys during his interview of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, pushing him on the sincerity of his apology and the level of his responsibility asked, "...whether you pray at all and whether you ask for God's forgiveness?"

That's plumb line talk today.

Hindsight is an exacting corrective on all our actions. There will be times when we act in good faith, and get things wrong. There will be times when we act before we know all the facts, or want to impress others, or wish to make things happen for our own ends. It's a lesson politicians and leaders of all sorts learn, and relearn, because the decisions they make have an impact beyond the immediate.

It is a lesson that doctors and surgeons and nurses learn and relearn. It is a lesson that teachers of children and young people learn and relearn. It is a lesson that judges and lawyers learn and relearn. It is a lesson that church leaders learn and relearn. It is a lesson learned and relearned by anyone in any role of leadership or authority. In the work place, in charities, and in the home.

For you see, the plumb line of God is held up against every human life, and judges who we are, what we say, what we think, what we do. We have been given the gift of life. We have been given the knowledge of good and evil, and the freedom to choose. Much has been given to us; much is expected of us.

It's not just Tony Blair. Quick though many are to judge his actions, and the actions of others who appear to have fallen short. It is also us. The plumb line of God is stretched out against our lives. Not so that we shouldn't scrutinise the actions of others, but that we should remember as we judge, so we ourselves will be judged. By others. By God. By ourselves.

This sounds harsh and unpalatable. Where is the God of grace in this, the God of mercy? That God is still there, but first, that God asks us as we look at those around us to look also at ourselves. We have little business in judging the faults and failings of others if we are blind to our own faults and failings. I think Jesus had something to say about that. Specks of dust and

wooden beams. God loves us still, despite our failings. God never leaves us to our own devices, but holds up, every time, a mirror to our lives, a mirror to our world. And God asks, “What do you see? Do you see the whole picture? Do you see yourself and what you are doing? Do you see where things need to be better, or change?” Beyond the rules of judgement, where we might expect punishment, or revenge, God gives another chance; God gives hope. God of justice; God of mercy.

God of standards and expectations also. The parable of the Good Samaritan and all one needs to do is listen to it and let these wise and deceptively simple words do their work in our hearts and our imagination. Who are we in the parable? The innocent victim? The priest or Levite? The robbers? The innkeeper? The good Samaritan? Against each one of these characters the plumb line of God could be stretched and we can assess their character, motivation, and compassion.

The point of the parable, beyond those rules of common decency and humanity is to get the lawyer, who originally asked Jesus the question that sparked the parable, to reflect on his own life. The lawyer wants to inherit eternal life. The lawyer knows that he has to love God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind. The lawyer even knows that he is to love his neighbour as himself. But he wants to know, what does this mean? What does this look like in the world in which I live?

Jesus tells the story, of innocence and cruelty, of indifference and sacrificial generosity, of life coming after death, of hospitality and graciousness and trust. “Who proved neighbour to the man?” Jesus asked. The lawyer replied, “The one who showed mercy...”

Beyond the rules of charity and common-sense and decency; beyond the rules of self-interest and personal security; beyond the rules of fairness, and living peaceably, and honesty and inclusion – not to bypass any of these – but to interpret them – is showing mercy.

Mercy when the plumb line of God reveals the brokenness, the crookedness, the ugliness of human actions and motivation. Mercy when people have done nothing to deserve it, but are

shown it because that is the right thing to do. Mercy because the long arc of God's justice bends towards mercy.

The plumb line of God is deployed to judge the leaders and governments. The Saddam Husseins and the Tony Blairs. The plumb line of God is deployed to judge the Theresa Mays and Andrea Leadsoms, the Boris Johnsons and the Michael Goves. The Jeremy Corbyns and the Labour shadow cabinet. The Nationalists and Greens and all those people in the political public eye. Are they perpetrators, or victims, or walkers by on the other side? The plumb line of God will tell you; and them.

But the plumb line stretches out alongside us, and measures our lives. Great and small, we are all measured.

And after the judgement? Who will prove neighbour to us? When we have gone beyond the rules, might there yet be a good Samaritan prepared to show us, even us, mercy. And if for us, then who else is in need of the mercy of God?

After the plumb line, and the judgment, the story does not end. There is mercy. Mercy for every tortured soul; mercy for every cracked conscience; mercy for every broken promise; mercy for every failed intention; mercy for every wrong-headed action; mercy for every frozen heart.

We live in a world of judgement. Working out what is right and what is wrong matters. It always will. But if all there is in the world is judgement, we will not survive. To survive in this world, to transform and grow and move on and become better, we need mercy. Beyond the rules, and we need those rules, lies mercy. Mercy that reminds us of the rules, and why they need to be there. But mercy that gives the second chance, so that we, any of us, all of us, might start again.

The plumb line of God in one hand; the mercy of God in the other. If you must judge, remember mercy. "Go and do likewise", said Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Thomas W Mann, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 3 p221