

## **Sermon: Trinity 6 All Saints**

Richard and Kath's welcome service

It's a great delight to welcome Richard and Kath today as they begin the next stage of their journey here with us in Bromsgrove. Richard's ordination as Deacon last Sunday in Worcester Cathedral was a wonderful occasion and a real privilege to be there given all the constraints and challenges of this COVID era.

Richard and I have already discovered that we share a number of things in common; one of which is that we both trained at Queens', the ecumenical theological college in Birmingham. Queen's is a wonderfully diverse community with people from lots of different cultural and theological backgrounds; I'm sure Richard found it as humbling an experience as I did, to learn alongside people of sharply different perspectives and experiences. There is nothing homogenous about the Holy Spirit.

As Richard begins his ministry amongst us, today is a good moment to reflect on the nature of vocation, and in particular the order of Deacon which is shared by all priests and bishops. And we do so, through our readings this morning, in the company of two of the greatest names in scripture – Amos and John the Baptist.

I've long held a soft spot for Amos, a very ordinary guy, called by God away from caring for the orchards in Judea, to speak truth to power at the very heart of religious and political life in Bethel. Amos never compromised his message and spoke with a directness that might embarrass us if replicated in public today. You might remember these lines from a couple of chapters before today's passage: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream".

Amos is often quoted by those of us who believe the church is called to confront power, challenge injustice and help usher in a fairer political and economic system for the people of the world. Amos would most definitely say 'Amen' to all of this. But whereas we might be satisfied with feeling that our actions had made a small difference through our campaigns and protests, changes in personal lifestyles and shopping habits; Amos was motivated by much greater ambitions than ethical concerns and the relief of poverty alone. For Amos, confronting power and challenging injustice was the route by which people could find their way back to God; ending exploitation was a spiritual exercise, not merely a political one.

Justice is a spiritual concern, for our complicity in injustice, injures and demeans the beautiful image of God that resides at the heart of all the peoples of the world, oppressed and oppressor. We look on images of exploitation and poverty and feel deep, deep sorrow for those affected. Yet we do so from a position of significant economic and political advantage; advantage that in part has created the very poverty we denounce. We only have to look at the inequitable distribution of virus jabs throughout the world to realise that according to the powers of politics and economics, some lives are deemed more important than others. Not in God's sight though, and therefore not in our name, either.

I love the part of today's reading where Amaziah accuses Amos of being a professional prophet and urges him to pursue his trade elsewhere, well away from the centre of power where his prophecies might have an impact.

Like Amos, we are duty bound as Christians to be an inconvenient presence, drawing attention to the world's shortcomings in turning away from the ways of God. How inconvenient of a presence can you be this week in God's name? Our faith must take us to places of influence and power, and we must be prepared to speak powerfully and confidently in the public arena about issues that affect the

spiritual and moral health of our nation. We look to our spiritual leaders to take the initiative and thereby give our voices encouragement, courage and weight, though too often we are bitterly disappointed by their silence.

There is a need for the prophetic voice in today's church; voices that, like Amos, strike at the heart of the self-serving powerful elites whether in politics, economics or religion; voices that turn the world's expectations upside down, a little like the Jesus of Nazareth who turned the tables metaphorically and literally throughout his ministry. There's more than one direct parallel between Amos and Jesus, despite being separated by eight centuries. Like Jesus, Amos draws a direct parallel between affluence and complacency on the one hand and pride and downfall on the other. Those who consider themselves first, says Amos, will be the first into exile. Like Jesus, the first will be last, and the last first.

Amos saved some of his strongest language for his contrast between the rituals of temple worship and social justice. The priorities of God were clear; it wasn't that sacrificial worship was unimportant, but that it is by justice and righteousness that the people of Israel will be judged, and not by their liturgical attentiveness. However beautiful our worship in church might be, it is our performance as witnesses to God's love, Monday-Saturday by which we will be judged.

It will take time for Richard, as it does for all of us, to work through the shape of his calling, prophetic though I hope it will be. He does so within the ministry of the diaconate, the meaning of which is frequently interpreted through the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. It is a ministry for others, but importantly a ministry for all others; just as Amos criticised all cultures for turning away from God, not simply the people of Israel, so our lives of service are for all in our communities, whether people of faith or not.

But what about that other great character in today's readings: John the Baptist. Well, I trust Richard is not going to lose his head during his curacy, though there may be times when he thinks I'm off mine.

There is a thread of humility in the story of John which is important for all of us. John never saw the glories of the Kingdom beyond the little glimpses offered by creation and the best of human nature.

John was a preparer of ground, not a harvester. Think of all the stories and encounters Jesus had after John's death that John never witnessed. Yet John, I believe, would have been the first to say, "this Messiah thing you know, is not about me, it's about God in Jesus".

And so, it is for all of us in ministry, ordained and lay, authorised or not. It's not about us, it's about God. However, you live out your calling, you do it not for rewards now or in the future, you do it as your response to the love of God received in your life.

Richard, be assured of our love and commitment to you throughout your curacy. There's much to learn, much to give, much to receive. May it be fun for all of us. Amen.