

Sunday Thought

10th July 2022 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings

Amos 7: 7 – 17
Psalm 82
Colossians 1: 1 – 14
Luke 10: 25 – 37

Miles of Grace

The prophetic words of Amos from about twenty-eight centuries ago are a tract for our times. Israel was currently experiencing prosperity and comparative peace, with a high level of religious faithfulness. BUT, religious practice was often showy and insincere and the rich were making their often corrupt fortunes at the expense of the poor. Amos' words in today's reading sum



up his overall preaching about the state of the nation. He tells of a vision of God, holding up a plumb-line against a wall. The wall is obviously leaning, 'out of line', and in danger of collapse just like the country. A 'southern' farmer from the rival nation of Judah speaking to affluent religious leaders of Israel in the north was not a recipe for success! Amaziah, representing the priestly power, was very blunt in his view. He told Amos that he, Amaziah, was God's voice at the religious centre here in Bethel and an ignorant southern preacher was not welcome. Amos disagreed and showed his credentials. *I may only be a sheep farmer and fig tree dresser with no professional qualifications, but I know God called me to this ministry and I'm sure his words will come true. So, Amaziah, be warned. You, your king and your people will be shamed.*

The background to Amos having a hard time involved a similar religious, political and racial division to that which Jesus knew between Jews and Samaritans. He referred to in his story of 'The Samaritan'. *Good* is a description we have added to the story title for our general understanding of the parable. The story was, of course, an answer to a young legal-minded follower who wanted a more precise definition of 'neighbour' in the Commandments. Jesus told him the obvious. Your neighbour is the person nearest to you right now, whoever or however they are. *Everyone* in fact. As so often happens with reading the scriptures, I found a deeper thought while, yet once more, listening to this story.

I had in mind another journey illustration which Jesus used. He reminded his hearers of their obligation to assist the Roman military – a soldier could give you his pack to carry one mile for him. Jesus said the *neighbourly* thing to do was to say. 'Ok! I'll carry it two miles!!' In those terms I started to calculate the mileage involved in the Samaritan's inter-racial, inter-national, kindness.

He saw a man lying, distressed at the side of a road renowned for robbery with violence. He had passed two 'religious' travelling the other way into Jerusalem city from which he had set out not long before. They had obviously done nothing to help the severely injured man, although to allow them credit they may have been going to get help! The Samaritan, full of pitying love – *after all, it could have been me* - made use of oil and bandages from his primitive first aid kit. *That makes ONE mile.* He then put the sick fellow on his own mule while he walked. Mile TWO. At the nearest hostelry, he stayed the rest of the day, setting up his own casualty ward. Mile THREE. Next day he left money for the victim's after-care with assurances of covering further expenses when he returned. That's mile FOUR. His return visit would count as Mile FIVE, and maybe a future friendship with a one-time stranger would bring him many more mileage points.



I thought how that is a wonderful picture of Christian *neighbourliness*, and even more, of the grace of God. His grace is his boundless love for all of us and for the whole world, with no thought of keeping a mileage log. It is a non-stop, forever love, stretching right through all eternity. A love far higher, deeper, broader than than we can ever begin to imagine. A love which picks us up and carries us the whole journey, for free – even to the cost of a Cross. Love which goes on providing healing, forgiveness and a fresh start, with peace, and on-going friendship right to the end of our journey. This grace of God is also his guidebook to discovering real 'neighbour-love'.

Paul, from today's reading, writes to a church which like Amos' dangerous wall illustration, is in danger of collapsing because of doctrinal arguments and niceties of worship. Paul advises this church to live by the grace of God – lives of faith, hope and love - through which they will re-build and maintain their unity.

When, at the end of worship we hear, or share the '*Grace blessing*', it should be a great spiritual uplift to feel the immense, unfathomable love of God bringing and holding us all together with faith, hope and love, making us ready to clock up many more neighbour-miles as a witness to His grace.

A prayer of regret for grace failures [based on Psalm 82]



Forgive me, Lord.

It is so easy to be overtaken by casual thinking of peoples' needs.

Prevent me judging unjustly when I know only a rumour of the need:

closing my eyes to pictures of the poor and homeless:

closing my ears to the cries of hungry little children:

keeping my lips closed when I should be speaking up for the weak and powerless:

closing the flap of my pocket when I am asked to give a bit more.

Help me to live by your grace, with a never-failing love for you and for others.

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