

How The Rot Sets In



We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances (Amos 8:5)

Charge 'em for the lice, extra for the mice
Two percent for looking in the mirror twice
Here a little slice, there a little cut
Three percent for sleeping with the window shut
When it comes to fixing prices
There are a lot of tricks I knows
How it all increases, all them bits and pieces
Jesus! It's amazing how it grows!

That's a verse from a song in *Les Miserables*. In the course of the song the innkeeper Thenardier describes ways in which he tricks his customers. It's all petty trickery; no major crime, but he does move on to that later in the story when he gets into housebreaking. Even at this early stage, though, the rot has begun to set in.

It's the kind of petty crime we see, at first, in Amos's prophecy. "We will make the ephah small" - it's like the old trick that unscrupulous shopkeepers would use of putting their finger on the scales when they were weighing out produce so the customer got less than they were paying for. "We will make the shekel great" - that's a bit like, when a particular buyer has too much clout their money seems to buy more than other peoples' might; often to the cost of the producers. "We will practice deceit with false balances" - in times gone by it wasn't unknown for unscrupulous traders to have two sets of weights - one they used when they were buying and one they used when they were selling. My wife used to work in Trading Standards - I got to hear about these things.

Petty crime - in the case of the big buyer being able to demand unreasonably low prices it isn't even that. And yet. Amos was an eight century prophet. Although he came from the southern kingdom of Judah, he worked substantially in the northern kingdom of Israel and in its capital, Samaria. He was prophesying to a kingdom that was soon to collapse and be conquered and destroyed. In a sense, though, what Amos is pointing to is the weakness of the country - a rot has set in.

Sometimes we have a soft spot for the charming scoundrel - the kind of man we meet in Jesus's parable of the unjust steward. It's an interesting parable because it involves what's known in the ethics trade as a moral inversion - the man is praised for wrongdoing by his master, the very man he has cheated. His "cunning" is appreciated; his "skills" are respected. All of which tells us that Jesus knew how to use irony. What, I think, Jesus is getting at is that he's asking his listeners, "Do you really think this is the kind of behaviour that will find favour in Heaven?" And, perhaps, "Is this really the kind of behaviour we might find acceptable?" And, too, I find myself wondering, what kind of society would it be where such "cunning" and such "skills" were appreciated and valued. It would be one where the rot had set in - one that was destined for destruction.

And it's one we might recognise - just as Amos, if he could be transported forward in time to the early 21st Century might recognise it. In our banking sector a culture grew up where it was OK to use one's "leverage" to make the ephah small and the shekel great - to use false balances. There were some fiddled interest rates to make more money for themselves and they invited each other round to champagne parties to celebrate their "cunning". There were some who used their clout to sell payment protection schemes to the unwary - and their managers and overseers didn't find their way to clear to questioning the situation - they respected the "skills" of their "selling team". And so the rot set in, and it spread throughout the banking system to the point where it collapsed.

Just as for the northern kingdom, just as for the banks, any society that begins to allow cheating or lying or deceit as "acceptable" is doomed. Any society that begins to accept the exploitation of the weak by the strong, or the impoverishment of the poor by the wealthy, as "economically inevitable" is one where the rot has begun to set in - that's why Amos speaks of slavery; it's why he speaks of selling the sweeping of wheat - they were meant to be left for the poor and the hungry. Any society that loses its moral compass is doomed.

For those of my parents' generation, and for those of us who grew up in the shadow of the Second World War, perhaps the prime example is Nazi Germany. Within two decades a society that had known some of the finest thinkers and artists in the world went from the liberal democracy of the Weimar Republic to the gas chambers of Treblinka, but, truth to tell, the rot had set in a long time before. With the first German who called a Jew "Yid", and nobody challenged it, the rot set in.

See, evil starts small. It starts with “bending the rules” then it goes to breaking them - just a little. Then you start to think that the rules don’t matter and when societies go down that route it is the poor and the vulnerable who suffer. This is why the Church has to stand up for the basic principles of right and wrong, for justice and freedom and righteousness; it’s why the Church has to get “political” sometimes; it’s why the Church has to stand in the tradition of Amos and condemn those activities - legal or otherwise - that enrich the rich by impoverishing the poor; that enslave the needy to meet the needs of the wealthy.

I say “The Church”. The Church is us - it is you and me. We too have a responsibility to speak up for what is right and what is wrong and to act accordingly. When the ephah is small the poor go hungry or they wind up trudging to food banks in one of the wealthiest countries of the world - this, my friends is not right. When the shekel is great the wealthy - let’s call them Wonga - can demand more of the poor than they can afford. This, my friends, is not right. When there are false balances in play the wealthy can buy the way for their children to wealth and prosperity and power. This, my friends, is not right.

Perhaps the Church has spent too much time, when we talk about morality, talking about what people do in their bedrooms. Amos directs us in a different direction and so too does Jesus. When the poor and the hungry are easy pickings for the wealthy greedy, the rot sets in. When the alien and the immigrant become targets for easy hatred or campaigns to “send them home”, the rot sets in. When the unfairness of life is simply accepted - especially by those who benefit most from it - the rot sets in and when it has really got hold the only thing left will be collapse.

We gather, this morning, as the Church - as the body of Christ on Earth. When Christ walked this Earth he lived among the poor and hungry and so identified himself with them. When Christ walked this Earth he set at naught the divisions of race and religion that he encountered. When Christ walked the Earth he proclaimed the love of God for the weakest, the poorest, the most despised, the most forgotten scrap of humanity.

And this, I suppose, is what morality is, It’s not just about sex - it’s about what - and, more crucially, who - we value. Truth, freedom, justice - these are things that build a strong and stable society. Which is good, but they are also the things that reflect the heart of the Christian revelation - that everybody matters and should be treated with justice and fairness. If that’s political so be it. It is also, though, an expression of the love of God

Lord may we not be beguiled to doing things that “aren’t very wrong”. May we model what is right to the world by caring for our neighbours