

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 117

Sunday 11th July 2021

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to this Sunday’s edition of Cutting Edge Camelot. Below I reflect on what it means to have God’s strength and also to be able to admit our own weakness.

Scripture Passages

Amos 7: 7-15

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸ And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; ⁹ the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

¹⁰ Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹ For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’”

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴ Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵ and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”

Mark 6: 14-29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” ¹⁵ But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²² When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” ²³ And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.”

²⁵ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” ²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not

want to refuse her. ²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Reflection

There have been many shocks in the course of this pandemic. One of the biggest and earliest shocks occurred at the beginning of the lockdown when the government ordered that churches should be closed. Who would have believed this if you had said that this would happen even say a month or two earlier?

And regardless of our view on the merits of this decision, it does raise the question of who has the right to make such orders. Or to put it in another way who owns the house of God?

Who owns the house of God is certainly a relevant issue in our passage from the book of Amos.

Amaziah the priest, a representative of the royal establishment, has found the prophetic messages which Amos has been giving to be disturbing.

These messages have emphasised the importance of justice, of acting in accordance with God's plumbline. This shows up the difference between what is straight and right and what is crooked. And more than that the message has been one of God's judgement carried out through the agency of a foreign invader where *the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste.*

Surely such demoralising and unpatriotic talk should not be allowed! It amounts as Amaziah tells his master King Jeroboam to conspiracy against the king and state. The important test of a prophecy, whether or not it is true, is simply not applied or even considered here.

However maybe Amaziah does have a certain genuine respect for prophecy. For having consulted with the king he does not deny Amos the right to prophesy. Instead he tells him to prophesy in a different place, to flee to the neighbouring kingdom of Judah and to earn his living there. But, never again should Amos prophesy at Bethel *'for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.'*

And so who owns the sanctuary and the temple? In Amaziah's view it belongs to the king and to his kingdom, the state. The sanctuary in other words is a symbol of the king's power and only approved messages are to be spoken there. Nothing in other words that might challenge the mighty and powerful.

Those who speak inconvenient truths are simply told to go elsewhere. Or as we might say today, to find another outlet for the expression of their talents. It is a less brutal form of persecution than, say, crucifixion but its intent is clear. We don't want you here.

But despite this attempt to get rid of Amos and his inconvenient presence the questions remain. Whose shrine is this? Does it really belong to the king or to God? And if it belongs to God then what right do we have to 'shut down' God's word?

Both our passages deal in different ways with the conflict between kings and prophets.

And interestingly, in both cases, initially opposition is not expressed in the form of overt violence. Amos' life is not threatened, he is simply told to go

elsewhere. Amaziah does seem to have a certain respect for Amos' prophecy, he is perfectly at liberty to prophesy. He just needs to do this somewhere else.

And again Herod in our gospel reading has a respect for John the Baptist. He does not feel easy about his part in John's death. It is probably a sign of a guilty conscience that when Herod hears of all that Jesus is doing he immediately thinks that this must be John the Baptist risen from the dead. Others do not make this same identification but think that Jesus might be Elijah or another prophet. Herod, however, has no doubt, he says "*John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.*"

And in John's lifetime, Herod has certainly seen John as a man of God, *a righteous and holy man*. He respects and even likes him although he does not understand all that John is saying. And this respect leads Herod to protect John as far as he is able to do so.

The problem, however, is that this does not go far enough. For even though Herod's loyalty and respect for John the Baptist is genuine, nevertheless when tested it proves to be weaker than other claims on his loyalty.

There is, first of all, Herod's family. John's problems so far as Herod is concerned have begun with his family. Herod has married his brother's wife. And then John instead of keeping quiet about this, viewing this as just a private, family matter, confronts Herod very directly saying to him, "*It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.*"

These are risky words from John the Baptist. And it leads him into trouble. Herod's loyalty to his wife and family is stronger than his respect for and interest in John. So he puts John in prison. However, this is not punishment enough so far as his wife Herodias is concerned. She bears a grudge against John and wants to go further, to have John put to death.

So she silently nurtures her grudge and waits for the right opportunity to come. And eventually this opportunity does indeed arise. Herod's daughter pleases Herod and his guests on the occasion of his birthday party. Rashly, Herod makes a promise to his daughter in the form of a 'blank cheque' and so he makes a solemn oath to the effect that, *Whatever you ask me, I will give you.*

Herod's daughter proves to be totally under the control of her mother who has been waiting for an opportunity to put John to death. So after the mother has been consulted the request duly comes to have John the Baptist's head served on a platter.

And here we learn that it not simply the demands and pressures of his family that prove to be stronger for Herod than his respect for John as a man of God. The concern for his own reputation, the desire not to lose face in front of other people whom he considers to be important is also stronger.

So even though Herod is deeply unhappy with fulfilling his daughter's request nevertheless *out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.* And so John's fate is sealed. Soldiers are sent to the prison where John is being held and the order is given for his execution.

So very clearly both these passages are in different ways about the cost of being a prophet. Amos' fate of being ordered into exile and forbidden to speak any more at the king's shrine may in comparative terms be gentler and less brutal than John's fate of being imprisoned and then executed. And yet both of them are nonetheless forms of persecution.

And it is a persecution ordered not by those who have an outright opposition to God and to God's truth but by those whose loyalties are divided. Amaziah who can see that Amos' words may have some value but whose loyalty to the king and the court is more powerful and who therefore comes up with the solution not of destroying Amos but of telling him to move on. Herod who

respects and even likes John the Baptist but whose desire to please his family and to preserve his reputation among powerful and influential people is stronger.

And so when it comes to the point of decision it is the prophet who suffers.

In reflecting on these passages, we might ask ourselves whether we have ever been in the position of being a prophet who has to speak truth to a powerful and important person. We may well have weighed up the costs and consequences of doing so. In modern day terms, this might mean being a 'whistle blower'. It has probably been difficult for us and no doubt we have felt at times like wavering or giving up.

Or perhaps we have been in the opposite position, that of Amaziah or of Herod. We know what the truth and the right thing to do are but we find ourselves defeated in our attempts to follow this path because our loyalties are divided. Other motivations seem more important to us.

If we have found ourselves in this position where like Herod we deeply regret a decision that we have made and have an uneasy conscience about it then we need not despair. Rather we need to turn to God and ask both for forgiveness and also a new heart, a pure and undivided heart in which we are able to put God first whatever this might cost us.

Tristram

Points for Prayers

- For the grace to have an undivided heart towards God
- For clarity in the new church guidance to be published on Friday 16th July (see below)

- Continued thanksgiving for care, skill and courage of NHS workers and those in care homes demonstrated throughout the course of this pandemic
- Those whom we know who are facing illnesses of all kinds, those who have recently been bereaved and those suffering as a result of social isolation and in other ways
- Bishop Ruth and the rest of the Diocesan staff as they take on additional responsibility following Bishop Peter's retirement and plan for the future
- For North Cadbury Church Primary School and other local schools as they near the end of the school year and for the leavers' service at St Michael's North Cadbury on Thursday 22nd July
- Prayers for those affected economically by the lockdown, for businesses and those who have become unemployed
- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

Hymn

A hymn which focusses on the need for our loyalty to Jesus to be central in our lives is 'O Jesus I have promised.'

Our daughter's christening

We had been hoping to invite the whole of the benefice to share in the service of baptism for our daughter Tahlia. The date set was Sunday 18th July.

When we received the news of the extension of the lockdown restrictions we decided to go ahead with this date rather than risk further uncertainty. This means that the service will be capped at 30 and will also be carried out in accordance with current church and government guidelines. For this

reason it will be a separate invitation only service. We hope later on to share with you some photographs of Tahlia's christening.

Tristram

New church and government guidance

As we are aware the majority of the covid restrictions are to be lifted as from Monday 19th July. However, we have not as yet received details of what this will mean in practical terms either from the government or from the church. Further government guidance is expected this coming Monday and following this church guidance will be produced. This is expected to be published on Friday 16th July.

Congregational Singing

Congregational singing is now permitted for those services which are taking place outdoors in the churchyard. However, at present the position remains unchanged for services inside the church. Here congregational singing is not permitted.

Services for July

Sunday 11 th July	9.30 am Communion, Galhampton
Sunday 11 th July	9.30 am Communion, North Cheriton
Sunday 11 th July	9.30 am Matins, Blackford
Sunday 11 th July	11.00 am Sunday Worship, Holton
Sunday 18 th July	9.30 am Communion, Compton Pauncefoot
Sunday 18 th July	11.00 am Sunday Worship, North Cadbury
Sunday 18 th July	6.30 pm Evensong, Yarlinton
Sunday 25 th July	8.00 am Communion, Blackford

Sunday 25 th July	9.30 am Communion, South Cadbury
Sunday 25 th July	9.30 am Matins, Compton Pauncefoot
Sunday 25 th July	9.30 am Morning Worship, North Cheriton
Sunday 25 th July	11.00 am Communion, North Cadbury
Sunday 25 th July	11.00 am Communion, Holton
Sunday 25 th July	11.00 am Sunday Worship, Yarlinton
Sunday 25 th July	6.30 pm Evening Service, Galhampton

Excalibur

Excalibur is back in paper form. It contains details of Camelot people, a record of baptisms, weddings and funerals undertaken through the church in the Camelot Parishes. The July edition of Excalibur has also been published online at camelotparishes.co.uk

The Parish Office

If Rob is not in the Office during normal office hours please contact him via email (office@camelotparishes.org.uk) or on 01749 850934.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

*We pray that 'we might live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

(Ephesians 5:2)