

6) THE PROPHETS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.'

Matthew 5:6

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

Matthew 5:10

'Blessed are you when people revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'

Matthew 5: 11-12

The word 'righteous' is also the word for 'justice' and even 'goodness' in the bible.

We 'hunger' for something when we see little of it or are deprived of it.

We can be persecuted because of our commitment to righteousness.

We are persecuted physically, socially or we are slandered and spoken about falsely.

It takes courage to speak truth, to confront someone about something that is wrong, unjust, dishonest, hurtful, damaging and destructive in some way...

Of course, in our confrontation of others, we may discover that truth is more complicated or multi-layered than we will have first thought. Truth is something dialogical. We discover it not only in what we tell others, but in what they have to say in response to us. We must be open to being corrected ourselves as much as we are determined to correct others. To know truth we must be attentive listeners as much as we are determined to find the opportunity and courage to speak out. We must seek to speak truth with compassion and kindness rather than hammering someone over the head with it.

1) Amos

Amos is a farmer who experiences a call to speak out prophetically against Israel. What is his message? Israel will be punished by God for its unjust ways. There is corruption, oppression, dishonesty and complacency about what is wrong and about the suffering of the poor and weak among them. Israel will be punished by natural disasters like drought and locust infestation, as well as the invasion of foreign armies who will kill, destroy and take into exile many of the survivors. When do we feel what is happening to us or others is like a punishment for our moral failures, mistakes or 'sin'? When do we experience our suffering as unjust persecution from others or from God?

Amaziah – another prophet and priest of Israel, is more of the King's man. He hates Amos' negative talk. He tells the king Amos is a trouble maker who needs to be

stopped. Amaziah's philosophy is "Our country, love it or leave it." But what if we love our country so much that we cannot stand its corruption and decay? We want to challenge it to be better, and we warn that it will be destroyed if it continues its corrupting ways. This is Amos' message.

But there is also hope. Even if Israel will suffer terribly, God will never abandon it. There is always forgiveness with God. God's heart may be torn out, but God will always be there for the people no matter what. It doesn't mean God will stand in the way of judgement and destruction. It means God will walk with the people and carry their pain and loss with them. God suffers, but God also redeems life through and beyond the suffering. How do we walk with others even when they resist the truth and suffer for it? How far do we walk with them without enabling their denial or avoidance? When do we come to a point where we feel we must cut off?

There are different relationship metaphors in the bible to describe God's relationship with Israel and with humanity. As a parent, God cannot cut off from God's children no matter how much they resist the truth and suffer for it. God cannot protect them from the consequences of their choices. God will suffer disappointment and heartbreak over and over again. Even though God threatens and rages and weeps, God cannot and will not let go. God's love is a 'steadfast' (*hesed*) love.

But another metaphor is that of a lover. God and the people are like lovers, partners, spouses. There is commitment but it has to be reciprocal. They must live in truth, transparency, integrity and trust. If there is betrayal of truth, denial, infidelity or abuse, the relationship cannot last. It is not healthy or good.

Such a distinction is important when we contemplate the relationship of love and truth. We must be committed to truth no matter what in any relationship, in any issue of justice. However, there are consequences. A spouse or lover is not a friend and a friend is not a child. At what point must we say: enough? At what point must we find new inspiration to renew our steadfastness of love in a relationship seeking new ways to speak the truth with love?

2) Matthew 16: 13-28

Jesus is proclaimed as Messiah by his disciples and Peter is the one to speak it openly. Jesus then tells them that the Messiah will suffer rejection by Israel's leaders. Peter cannot tolerate the negative talk. Messiahs are supposed to conquer and succeed, not be rejected and suffer defeat. Jesus rebukes Peter for being afraid of the

truth. To be a disciple of truth, justice or righteousness, we have to be prepared to pay a price. The price can be steep sometimes.

Peter is like Amaziah with Amos. He can't stand the truth if it's critical and negative, and requires serious repentance and change. He can't stand the truth if it involves suffering and loss.

But even though Peter, like Amaziah, will fail in a severe way and be shown up as a fearful coward... forgiveness is given in the end... it is God's way. The prophet's role is to call for justice without compromise, trusting that the truth will always set us free even if it costs us everything. God will forgive even if and when it costs God the cross. What price have you paid for your commitment to truth in a relationship, in your family, in your work-place, in your community?

Thank you, for having invested your time and attention to engaging spiritually these meditations. Stay tuned for study and discussion opportunities coming in September. Next Wednesday's eblast will provide some details.

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