

Woe to the Complacent!

Uzziah king of Judah in Jerusalem and Jeroboam II king of Israel in Samaria, together with the other leaders of their lands, must be feeling quite pleased with themselves as they surveyed their kingdoms from their fortresses on Mount Zion and on the mountain of Samaria. No foreign enemies threaten Israel or Judah on any side. The kings and their courts sat secure in their well-fortified capitals, holding audience for the people who came to Jerusalem and Samaria seeking justice or favours.

In today's First Reading from Amos, we find the Lord shattering their self-satisfaction with a word of woe. He suggests that the great men of Jerusalem and Samaria consider some cities that have met defeat or destruction: Calneh, not certainly known to us today but perhaps a place in Syria and not the Mesopotamian city mentioned in Genesis chapter 10; once-mighty Hamath, which lost its southern territories to Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:28); and Gath, the Philistine city whose walls Uzziah broke down (2 Chronicles 26:6). What happened to those once great cities could happen to Samaria or Jerusalem as well.

Satan knows how to distract human beings from contemplating unpleasant topics such as sin and the coming judgment. Amos describes the high luxury in which the Israelite leaders are living. The wealth gained through military victories and profitable commerce has purchased comforts for their homes. The average Israelite house had little furniture. At night people slept on the floor or on an earthen shelf, wrapped in their cloaks. Now the nation's wealthy are sleeping on beds inlaid with carved panels of ivory, while by day they sprawl on soft couches. In the average ancient Israelite diet, meat was reserved for special celebrations. Now the wealthy are feasting regularly on choice cuts of lamb and veal. Their days and nights are occupied with parties and entertainment, times to strum stringed instruments, drink large quantities of wine, and perfume one's body with choice ointments. No pleasure seems to be lacking.

What is missing, says the prophet, is spiritual concern on the part of the people's leaders. The kingdom that seems so fortunate is actually ruined, because it has decayed from within. This society that thinks it is enjoying health and prosperity is actually sick unto death. Yet the kings and their leading citizens distract themselves with pleasures and entertainment. They refuse to grieve for the fact that "Joseph" - the Northern Kingdom that includes the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons - is morally rotten and ruined. Very well, Amos says: let the notable men of Israel lead their people - into captivity. Let Israel's feasting and lounging be replaced by the bitter experience of exile far from the Promised Land.

It is not difficult for us in prosperous times to look around and see an all-consuming concern for pleasure in the citizens of our country. We need to remember that Amos is speaking to God's chosen people Israel, and that today his words apply particularly to Christians. We who call ourselves disciples of Jesus in this favoured land also enjoy the prosperity of our times. We buy comfortable furniture, eat and drink at expensive restaurants, and listen to beautiful music on fine stereo systems.

We say that our wealth is a gift of God. But is it also true that we do not grieve over the ruin of His church? Are we unconcerned whether our pastors are teaching what the Bible teaches, as long as our congregation has an impressive physical plant? Do we take no measures to protect even our own families against the moral laxity that rules the world? Do we wrap ourselves so tightly in a soft cocoon of luxury that we live unaware of people suffering for lack of food, clothing, and a roof over their heads? Do we spend so generously on ourselves that little is left to give for preaching the Good News among those who have not heard it? Then Jesus reproves our unbelief and warns us with the words He said to the unbelieving elders of the Jews: "I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43).

