

The Greed of Israel's Merchants

Amos addresses some parts of his prophecy to particular elements of the Israelite people, for example, the wealthy women (4:1-3) or the complacent leaders (6:1-7). He also proclaims judgment to all Israel (2:6-16) or even to both kingdoms, Israel and Judah (3:1-15). From our Second Reading today, Amos turns to the greedy merchant class. Their offense is not wealth itself but the way they are gaining it at the expense of their needy fellow-countrymen. They treat the poor like dirt under their feet.

Evidently these merchants were observing the forms of worship. Amos said, *“You ask yourselves: ‘When will the New Moon be over, that we may sell grain? When will the Sabbath be over, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may shrink the forty-litre corn-measure, make the twelve-gram money-weight large and cheat with fraudulent scales, that we may buy helpless people with silver and a needy person for a pair of sandals, that we may sell the chaff-sweepings as wheat?’”* (8:5-6). They obviously joined the religious assemblies when the new moon announced the beginning of another month (Numbers 10:10; 28:14). They closed their grain stalls in the marketplaces to rest on the Sabbath days, according to the law (Exodus 20:10). Yet all the time their hearts were not in their worship. Rather, they were itching for the days of rest and worship to pass so that they could get back to making money.

Do we sometimes neglect worship in order to make extra income on overtime pay, so that we can spend it on luxuries? Do we occupy our minds with thoughts of profit and loss even while our mouths pray and sing hymns? Do we go to church reluctantly or participate in public worship halfheartedly because “time is money,” and we do not like to spend it feeding our souls on the Word of God? Do we couple such disrespect for the Lord with a lack of concern for our needy fellowmen? If so, then we have become like these Israelite merchants.

The particular kind of business that Amos uses as an example is the sale of grain, since bread was the common people's staff of life. Grain was sold by weight. When a customer bought grain, he paid with bits of silver, balanced on the merchant's scales. These greedy and dishonest Israelite merchants in Jeroboam's time were selling their wheat fraudulently, cheating their customers by using unbalanced scales.

Honesty will be one of the marks of those who follow the Lord. A Christian merchant will want to give good measure and a quality product for a fair price. He will not package or advertise deceptively and excuse himself by saying, “Let the buyer beware.” Speaking through Paul, the Lord tells us, *“Each of you should look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others!”* (Philippians 2:4).

In order to get enough food for himself, his wife, and his children, a poor Israelite may be forced to sell himself and his family into slavery. He may be so needy that he will sell himself for the price of a pair of sandals, just to have enough to eat. Even then, Amos says, the grain he brings home from the marketplace may not make good bread, because the merchants sweep up what has fallen to the ground and mix the chaff-sweepings with the wheat.

Already in the first sermon Amos addressed to Israel, the Lord pointed to the unrighteous treatment of the poor as a symptom of the nation's impenitence (2:6). The Lord's Law commanded: *“Do not be tightfisted toward a fellow-Israelite who is poor! give generously to him, and you shall not begrudge it when you give something to him! For the LORD, your God, will bless you because of this in everything that you do and in everything that you undertake! For there will always be poor people in the land! Therefore I am commanding you: ‘You shall certainly be open-handed to your fellow-Israelite, to the needy person, and to the poor person in your land!’”* (Deuteronomy 15:7-11). The Lord does not disregard how His people treat their poor fellowmen, particularly their poor fellow-members of the people of God. *“Indeed, may He rescue the needy person who cries out for help, the afflicted person, and the person who has no helper!”* (Psalm 72:12).

In both Old and New Testaments, the Lord puts Himself at the side of and in the place of the poor. *“He who has pity on a poor person lends to the LORD,”* He says (Proverbs 19:17). On the Last Day, Jesus will say to His believers who fed the hungry, gave hospitality to the needy, clothed the naked, comforted the sick, and visited the prisoners in jail, *“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for Me,”* (Matthew 25:40). Do our lives show such evidence of faith in Him?