

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent: Poverty and Prophecy

Readings: Amos 5:11, 21-24 & Luke 6:20-21

Lent is often seen as a time of personal reflection, of giving something up, of self-discipline. But at its heart, Lent is also a time of justice. A time to turn our eyes outward, to see the world as God sees it, and to ask what it means to live as God's people. This Lent, we are focusing on poverty, and today, we begin with prophecy: What is the role of prophecy in seeking justice?

The Old Testament prophets were not fortune-tellers or predictors of the future, but truth-tellers in their own time. They were called by God to stand in the midst of their people and proclaim both warning and hope. Prophets spoke out when the people abandoned God's ways, when leaders exploited the vulnerable, when religion became hollow ritual instead of true worship.

Amos is one such prophet. He lived in the eighth century BCE, a time of great wealth and prosperity for Israel—but also a time of deep injustice. The rich grew richer while the poor were oppressed. The courts were corrupt, and religious festivals continued, but they had lost their meaning because the people were not living righteously.

God's words through Amos are searing:

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”
(Amos 5:21, 24)

God is not impressed by religious observance that ignores the cries of the poor. The measure of a faithful people is not found in how well they sing their hymns or how beautifully they perform their rituals, but in how they live out God's justice.

When we turn to our Gospel reading, we hear Jesus speaking prophetically in what is often called the Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” (Luke 6:20-21)

Jesus, like Amos, speaks the uncomfortable truth that God’s kingdom turns the world’s values upside down. Those whom society overlooks—the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful—are at the very centre of God’s concern. Jesus’ words are not just comforting; they are challenging. They ask us: How do we live in a way that honours God’s kingdom? How do we stand alongside the poor and the hungry?

If we think of prophets as those who stand for justice, who challenge the powerful, and who call people back to God's ways, then Martin Luther King Jr. is a clear example of a modern prophet.

Like Amos, he lived in a time of great inequality. He saw how Black Americans were oppressed through segregation, economic injustice, and systemic racism. Like Amos, he spoke out, even when it was unpopular. He called not just for change in laws but for a change of heart—calling people to righteousness and justice.

One of his most famous speeches, “I Have a Dream,” echoes the prophetic tradition:

“We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

These words are taken directly from Amos. King understood that God’s justice is not passive—it is active, moving, reshaping the world like a river that cannot be stopped.

He also embodied the servanthood of Christ. He didn’t seek power for himself but poured out his life in service to others, marching, preaching, and ultimately laying down his life for the cause of justice.

Like Jesus in the Beatitudes, he stood with the poor and the oppressed. And, like many prophets before him, he faced opposition, imprisonment, and threats to his life. But he never gave up hope that God’s kingdom could come on earth as in heaven.

Amos gives us a striking image: justice rolling down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. It is an image of movement, of something unstoppable. God’s justice is not a trickle, not an occasional gesture, but a mighty river that shapes everything in its path.

This Lent, as we reflect on poverty, we must ask: Are we standing in the flow of God's justice, or are we trying to divert it? Are we letting it shape our lives, our communities, and our choices? Or are we building dams of apathy and self-interest?

Throughout this service, we have been using the refrain: "God of justice, help us walk in your ways." These are not just words of prayer but words of commitment. Walking in God's ways means choosing a life of justice, a life where we listen to the voices of the oppressed, where we use what we have to serve others, where we work to build a world that reflects God's love.

This is not always easy. Justice work is slow. It is costly. It can be exhausting. That is why lament is an important part of prophecy. The prophets did not just call for justice; they wept over injustice. They grieved for their people. Jesus, too, wept—at the tomb of Lazarus, over the city of Jerusalem, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Lament is part of our faith, because to love as God loves means to feel deeply the pain of the world.

Yet lament is not despair. It is an act of hope. We lament because we believe that change is possible, that God's kingdom is near, that the mighty river of justice is still flowing. And we are called to be part of that movement—not as heroes, but as servants.

To serve is to follow the example of Christ, who knelt and washed the feet of his disciples, who emptied himself for the sake of the world. Servanthood is not weakness; it is the way of God's kingdom. To serve is to resist the selfishness and greed that fuel poverty and injustice. To serve is to walk in God's ways.

So the question for us is: **Who are the prophets in our time? Who is calling us to justice? Are we listening?**

Is God calling us to be prophets? To be truth-tellers of injustice on our world.

And, perhaps even more challenging: **Are we willing to step into the river of God's justice, to be part of the movement that transforms the world?**

Lent calls us to a deeper walk with God—a walk that leads us to stand with the poor, to listen to the prophets, to work for justice. It calls us to lament the brokenness of our world, but also to hope. Because God's justice is

not a trickle. It is a mighty river. And we are invited to step into its flow.

So as we begin this Lenten journey, may our prayer be:

God of justice, help us walk in your ways.

Amen.

As you came I you were given a blue ribbon, as part of our commitment this morning I invite us to create a justice river. As symbol of your part in building God's kingdom on earth, as we sing our next song come and place your ribbon(s) on the cloth.