

The Danger of Forgetting

AMOS 5:18-24 — Revd Guy



- 5¹⁸ Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why would you have the day of the Lord?
It is darkness, and not light,
19 as if a man fled from a lion,
and a bear met him,
or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,
and a serpent bit him.
20 Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?
- 21 “I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
24 But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:18-24 (ESV)

Memories

It is a well-known fact that humans do not have great memories. When we attempt to remember things we often leave out details or we do things like forget where we left our keys. We also have a tendency to look at the past disproportionately more positively than we do the present, forgetting the bad and only remembering the good - a psychological phenomenon called “Rosy Retrospection.”

This phenomenon can affect any aspect of our memories. It could affect your memory of a childhood holiday only remembering that delicious ice-cream on the beach and forgetting the horrible stings from the jellyfish that same trip! It could equally affect how we remember a loved one who has died, remembering the good times and forgetting the arguments.

Needless to say, our memories are not reliable!

The Forgetfulness of Israel

Past and Present Prosperity

In today's passage we see that Israel falls foul to their memory as well. The time that Amos was speaking to Israel was one of prosperity for the nation. They had conquered surrounding lands and established profitable trades routes which brought newfound wealth to the nation. Israel looked at their history and remembered other times of prosperity, such as those under Joshua and David; times when the people of Israel were blessed by God and had his favour.

Israel saw the wealth of the past and how it had come about because of God's favour, and assumed that their current prosperity would mean God's favour was upon them too.

Desiring the day of the Lord

Their current wealth and assumed favour from God is why there are many in Israel who 'desire the day of the Lord' (Am. 5:18). The day of the Lord is a time when God saves his righteous people and delivers them from their enemies. Israel would have remembered the stories of Gideon defeating the Midianite army with only 300 of his own men (Jg. 7) or the story of David defeating Goliath and the Philistines (2 Sm. 5:17-25) and thought the same glorious victories would come for them. Their assumption that they were currently under God's favour meant that Israel believed the day of the Lord would be a time where their prosperity will increase even more as their enemies are defeated by God.

The forgotten commands

Unfortunately, Israel was only remembering the past they wanted to. Although Israel remembered that the prosperity of the past came from having God's

favour, they had forgotten that the Israelites only received such favour because of their faithfulness to God's commands. Israel at the time of Amos saw their prosperity and assumed they had God's favour forgetting all about the faithfulness that was required.

Israel at the time of Amos are not God's faithful people. Their prosperity has not come from righteous, faithful living, following God's commandments but has in fact come from the exploitation of the poor (Am. 5:11) and from corrupt practices around money (Am. 2:6, 2:8, 5:12, 8:5) things that God explicitly forbids in the book of Exodus. Israel had only

remembered the glory of the past and had forgotten the faithful living that led to it and it is reflected in their behaviour.

“Although Israel remembered that the prosperity of the past came from having God's favour, they had forgotten that the Israelites only received such favour because of their faithfulness to God's commands”

Forgetfulness leads to judgement & rejection

It is Israel's forgetfulness of God's law, shown by their neglect and exploitation of the poor and powerless, that leads to Amos declaring 'Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!' (Am. 5:18). Amos uses illustrations of it being like a man fleeing from a lion only to meet a bear or leaning against a wall only to be bitten by a snake (Am. 5:19-20) to show that there is no escape for Israel unless they change their ways. The day of the Lord means judgement on the unfaithful and so it means judgement for Israel at the time of Amos.

Their forgetfulness of God's law also means that God hates their worship, despising their feasts, taking no delight in their solemn assemblies, and rejecting their offerings (Am. 5:21-23). This is because it is hypocritical for Israel to be praising God and offering sacrifices to him when the actions in the rest of their lives are a rejection of the commands that he has given them. There is no real love for God, only a love for the prosperity his favour brings.

God expects those who worship him to worship him with their whole lives, not just when they go to the temple (or for us, go to church). That is why our reading

today ends with the words 'let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Am. 5:24). God expects Israel to be those who do not forget him, but rather remember to follow his commands in the daily lives.

“God expects those who worship him to worship him with their whole lives”

The Forgetfulness of Remembrance

Now you may be wondering what on earth any of this has to do with Remembrance Sunday. Well, it is because we too often are like Israel at the time of Amos and forget. We look back at the events of the past, and although we remember those who have died in the service of this country, too often we glorify the loss of life calling it a “noble sacrifice” for a “glorious victory” and forget that for many there was nothing noble or glorious about the death of someone they loved.

In the glorification of victory at Remembrance we can forget three things:

- We can forget those who suffered then
- We can forget those who are suffering now
- We can forget we are called to make peace not war

Forgetting those who suffered then

We can forget that for many the conflicts of the past were not glorious but were times of immense suffering. As more and more of the generation that lived and fought through the first and second world wars die so too do the real experiences and memories of those days. Newspapers, pictures, and videos, can give a sense of the past but they never tell the whole truth, there is always a layer of interpretation placed upon them by the reader - one mans glorious victory is another mans hardest day of their life.

“In remembering the victory we forget that war and conflict for many have an ongoing cost”

As people who did not live or experience those days, or as people who came out on the victorious side, are we not more prone to glorifying those days and forgetting the hardships? They were a time of terrible loss with the loss of homes and loved ones, a time from which many have never really recovered.

Forgetting those who suffer now

Not only do we forget those who suffered then, but we also forget those who suffer now. In remembering the victory we forget that war and conflict for many have an ongoing cost. Many of our veterans suffer from ongoing physical and mental trauma. Post-traumatic stress disorder, difficulty in finding employment, homelessness, and disability are common ongoing effects of war and conflict. And that is only thinking about our veterans, but the ongoing suffering of war is much more widespread. There are also countless refugees who have had to flee their homes because of war and conflict. They are stuck in undesirable

conditions in refugee camps, often separated from their families and loved ones. It is these sorts of people that Israel forgot in the time of Amos - let us not forget them too.

Forgetting our call to peace

In our celebrations on Remembrance Sunday we forget that Jesus taught a message of peace and reconciliation, not one of war. We see this throughout the gospels, particularly in the beatitudes where Jesus says 'blessed are the peacemakers' (Mt. 5:9), in his summary of the law Jesus tells us to love your neighbour as yourself (Mt. 22:39), he even calls on us to love our enemies (Mt. 5:43-45).

This peace that the Jesus speaks about is not just an absence of conflict, but is a more holistic peace, restoring us to the way we were created to be. To be peacemakers means that we are to

be those who actively seek to return to the harmony humanity once had not just between one other, but with all of creation, the peace we find in the creation narrative of the Book of Genesis.

“To be peacemakers means that we are to be those who actively seek to return to the harmony humanity once had”

We know that this is true peace because at the end of creation God took the time to rest. But this peace did not last as the disobedience of humanity led to God cursing creation bringing about enmity between the serpent and woman, between humanity and all creation including the land itself, even between man and woman themselves (Gen. 3). Relationships were fractured and what was once whole and peaceful ended up broken. Thankfully, through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, this relationship with God was restored and the restoration between humanity and creation is a promised outcome of that sacrifice when God's kingdom comes in its fullness when Jesus returns (Rev. 21-22).

As followers of Christ we have a duty to seek peace and reconciliation rather than conflict not only because it is what Jesus taught and not only because Christ made peace with God possible, but because as Christ's followers we are to be those who seek to help build God's kingdom here, a kingdom of peace and reconciliation between God and all of creation. If we forget our call to peace and reconciliation then we are no better than the Israelites at the time of Amos praising God but failing to follow his ways. Not that a failure to seek peace will lead to judgement as the in-action of Israel did for there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1) but that a failure to seek peace is to fail to seek the kingdom of God and the life that we are so eagerly searching for and expecting.

Our call to remember

I started this sermon talking about how forgetful we are and how unreliable our memories can be but I will end it with a call for us to remember. Let us remember the words of Jesus and the words of Amos and be those who peacefully seek justice and righteousness. We can do this by remembering those who have suffered in conflicts of the past and taking action now so that events like that never happen again by getting involved in politics and campaigning for peace. We can seek peace, justice and righteousness by supporting the Royal British Legion in their ongoing care for veterans as well as charities like Amnesty International who support refugees or local charities that support and house refugees as they seek permission to stay in the country. Finally, we can be those who model peace and reconciliation as a way of life resolving those conflicts both big and small in our lives as an act of faithfulness to the reconciliation with God that has been made possible for us in Jesus Christ.

Let us remember to actively seek peace and in our actions 'let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'

Amen.