

**11 July 2021**

**Proper 15.B, St. Clement's**

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After working through the readings this week, it seemed to me that each is posing a specific question to the church:

**From Amos:**

How are we – our society or country, or our church – crooked, no longer straight?

**And from the Gospel of Mark:**

Are we like Herod? Or are we like John the Baptist?

Amos is speaking to the King of Israel – the northern portion of the divided Kingdom of David, something that happened after Solomon's reign. It has always been something of a renegade region, resisting David's centralizing of worship in Jerusalem, and even resisting the idea of a king and monarchy. They were the conservatives, wanting to hold on to the old ways of confederation, when Gd was king enough for Israel. Even during David's time they had maintained their own worship sites, scattered around the land. During the years after Solomon their worship included some of the gods worshipped by neighbouring people. Their kings were not known for being obedient to the Law of Moses. The enacted parable of the plumbline shows them to be crooked, and through Amos they are warned that God will act both to purify and then to restore. The king exiles Amos to the southern kingdom as if Amos was one of the courtly prophets beholden to him. But Amos is not: Gd did not use one of the king's prophets to speak but this herdsman and keeper of sycamore trees.

Israel does not measure up to the standard of Gd's holy people.

In the Gospel we read of another kingdom that has gone crooked – the kingdom and household of Herod, son of King Herod the Great. It is in his palace that John the Baptist is imprisoned, and it seems that Herod would visit John in that prison to hear him – although John has nothing good to say to him. I'll always see Christopher Plumber as Herod in Franco Zeffirelli's mini-series, "Jesus of Nazareth." He captures the insecurity and dissipation of a man who is puppet king. He ignores the Jewish laws, and lives like other client-kings of the Roman Empire, currying their favour carrying out their agenda, and living like the Roman rulers do. In fact, he is a very exaggerated example of exactly what Samuel warned the people about when they demanded a king so many generations before. Things are so crooked in this household that he has married his living brother's former wife, and in the story today is "ruled" by his stepdaughter and her mother, a total reversal of patriarchal structures of authority – showing himself to be weak and less than a king.

This is definitely a king and a kingdom that do not measure up to Gd's standards.

We, too, are called to examine ourselves and ask if we measure up, in light of today's Scriptures.

It is not a comfortable time for the question - if there ever is a 'comfortable time.'

With the legacy of residential schools, the policies and treatment of indigenous people in Canada, and of the graves discovered this summer with more to come, neither the church nor society measure up to the Gospel that proclaims we are all children of the Creator, all members of Gd's household, and all made in the image of Gd. We were not good neighbours, merciful like the Samaritan who cared for the man left by the wayside beaten, not like people attentive to the words of the prophets or of Jesus, to walk in kindness and treat our neighbours as we would be treated. Because, at that time, good men and women did not recognize the aboriginal as our brother, our sister.

With the pandemic, though yet in the background, are the countries and people who have not received the vaccines and who must wait on the handouts of 'greater' nations. Our situation isn't simple - like them we had to obtain our vaccines from others. And we have promised to share vaccines with needy nations. But will we measure up? Will we see to it that the rest of the world has the vaccines and the means to deliver them before the Delta variant and others decimate already insecure populations? Will we see the vaccines taken and used as has been done before with resources we share - taken by warlords or used only for those who have the favour of the rulers? Is that even on people's radars as we cope with our own population and those at risk, with our own step-by-step movement toward a "New Normal?"

As Christians we know what Jesus would have us do. As citizens we can influence our leaders to make decisions. Through the arms of the church that work outside the country, like the PWRDF and Kairos, and agencies like the Red Cross and the United Nations, we do have ways to make a difference even when national responses are still 'on the table.'

What else might we be called to 'measure up' to, or for?

Every parish has a distinct relationship and responsibility according to where we are placed. St. Clement's is involved in the local community with its gift of hospitality, sharing our beautiful grounds with the community for peace and wellness; sharing the building with groups who serve the community in like ways, so that children

may thrive and people may be healed. As each member of St. Clement's engages in the world of Lynn Valley, with your neighbours and with the places where you go, the gift of hospitality goes with you. Care of creation, care for those who are in need, care of refugees. All these things done in response to Gd's love shown to us in Jesus, in genuine love for this piece of Gd's creation, and these people of the One Gd.

You have come through demanding times and held firmly to one another. You have found ways to stay connected without being in the same room or even on the same street. You have continued to be faithful in little ways and not so little.

When I was a teenager in Colorado, our church youth loved the week for our age groups at Trinity Ranch. We called it our "gas station" where we would fill up on Gd's Spirit and love for the next year in our churches and schools.

Being here after the months apart is like that, a new energy flows into us from being together. The Spirit who wove us together when we were apart is present in our togetherness now. It is filling us with new life, raising up light that had dimmed down, and renewing us for the new days ahead. The foundation is strong, the building straight. Gathered here we are reminded that we are a holy house ourselves – not because of the walls of this lovely church, but because of the Spirit within us. And we must be mindful that Gd is always doing a new thing – just as the people of Canada discover what the "New Normal" will be, we may discover that Gd is working toward something new in this place as well.

May our words be like the words of Jesus, good news, and not like the words of Amos and John, warnings of coming disaster.