

Readings for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

14th July 2024

First Reading: Amos 7:7-15

This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb line.' Then the Lord said, 'See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.' Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" And Amaziah said to Amos, 'O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.' Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Gospel: St Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of the healings and other miracles, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to

have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.

When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the Baptist.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptizer on a platter.' The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

A Reflection for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

The second Sunday of July is kept by many churches as Sea Sunday, a day to remember and give thanks for all who work at sea. It always seems particularly appropriate to mark Sea Sunday in this charge, where nearly all of us live close to the sea and where many of our neighbours work at sea or are connected to maritime industries in some way. According to the Mission to Seafarers, there are 1.9 million seafarers across the world; and then there are the many thousands who work in ports around the world, and in industries such as offshore energy. Our lifestyles are dependent on them: energy is obvious and about 90% of all the goods we import come by sea.

To work at sea is dangerous. I recently read a blog post by a Captain in the Merchant Navy who said: 'Worse things still happen at sea. ... Working on a ship is inherently more dangerous than working in an office.' On top of that inherent danger come other risks. Climate change has increased the ferocity and frequency of storms at sea in some parts of the world. In the last two weeks, Hurricane Beryl has swept through the Caribbean and into the Southern United States, the earliest category 5 storm on record. Such storms don't usually appear until September, but this year the sea is warmer. Whilst news has focussed on the devastating effects of the storm on land, we can barely begin to imagine what it must be like to be in a ship caught in such a storm.

Seafarers also face risks posed by world conflicts. Last year, we heard of the dangers posed to shipping in the Black Sea by the war in Ukraine, dangers that continue. This year, the conflict between Israel and Palestine has contributed to missile attacks and piracy on shipping in the Red Sea. And modern-day piracy continues to be a threat around the world, particularly off the coast of East Africa and in the Far East.

Seafarers face other hardships in their lives that are unknown to many of us. Their work is out of sight, so often out of mind. Those on freighters taking goods around the world are at sea for long periods of time and, even when ships come into port, they are often away from centres of population, hidden behind security fences. Even if the crew get time ashore, they are usually strangers in a strange land. Their work can be physically demanding, and qualifications required for promotion take years of study and experience. Spending extended periods away from

family and friends, they miss many family milestones – births, marriages, funerals, and are away from the support of their faith communities. We have much to be thankful to them for.

Jesus and his disciples would have some understanding of the hardships that modern seafarers face. We know that four of the disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John, were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, and the Gospels tell us that Jesus crossed the lake in a boat with them repeatedly – three times in the previous two chapters of Mark's Gospel. The lake was known for its sudden fierce storms, and two weeks ago our Gospel reading was the account of Jesus calming just such a storm. In two weeks' time, we will hear of another such storm in which the disciples were caught, and Jesus came to them, walking on the water. In those storms, the disciples, experienced though they were, feared for their lives.

Although the readings set for today, which are not specific for Sea Sunday, don't have any very obvious connections to the sea and seafarers, we do have Amos and his vision of a plumb line. Amos was a shepherd, prophesying in a village just south of Jerusalem in the 8th century BCE. He predicted the downfall and exile of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, and, as we heard, was not popular for it. He was someone very humble and insignificant doing what we might describe today as speaking truth to power, just as John the Baptist did as the messenger preceding Jesus. The vision of the plumb line is one of a series of visions of judgment that the Amos had.

As I am sure you know, a plumb line is used to check that something is vertical. If a plumb line is held up against something being built, it is immediately possible to see whether it is vertical or not, whether or not it literally stands true to its foundations. But plumb lines had another use. While ships today might use technology such as Sonar to find the depth of water in which they are sailing, historically a plumb line would have been used. The line was marked off in fathoms, and because the plumb fell straight to the bottom of the sea, it could be used to check that there was sufficient water so as not to run the ship aground.

In the Bible, the plumb line is a metaphor for truth, a marker for faithful living. As a prophet, Amos reiterated God's call to the people to faithful living, saying that the standard that God had set for them, represented by the plumb line, was being ignored. Faithlessness and injustice characterised society and, as such, they were not true to their foundational covenant with God. He had given them the Ten Commandments as a basis for their common life together as the people of God, but they had failed to live in accordance with them.

For any society or community to live and work together in harmony, with justice for all its members, it depends on people doing so with due consideration for one another, living in accordance with certain expected standards. It is why we continue to have laws and certain common expectations of behaviour. And, if that is true in ordinary society, how much more so must it be in a confined space such as on board a ship where people live in close proximity to one another with little privacy for months on end. For a ship, or an offshore installation, to be a safe place, everyone needs to play their part and trust others to do the same.

We all know that can be difficult at times in any walk of life but, just as God created the sea with its tossing waves and its storms and periods of calm so, like the course of our lives, God also gives us the strength to navigate those waters. And today we offer our prayers for seafarers in the particular challenges that they face in their lives, and giving thanks for the contributions they make to our lives.