

WHEN THE LION ROARS.

A study of the book of Amos

In a few weeks from now the African Bishops will assemble in Rome for the 2nd Synod on Africa. They will discuss the theme of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.

This theme is one of the important themes of the Bible and is found in the Old and New Testament.

In this short article I like to show what the prophet Amos tells us concerning this topic.

„The lion roars: who can help feeling afraid?

„The Lord Yahweh speaks: who can refuse to prophecy?“ (Am. 3:8).

„Yahweh roars from Sion and makes his voice heard from Jerusalem“ (Am. 1:2).

Amos preached in Bethel, in the Northern kingdom of Israel. He was so well informed about world history and current affairs that he captured his audiences and held their attention for hours. When he spoke of the surrounding nations, his listeners must have loved it, but when he spoke of Judah and Israel, it became too close for comfort. The people were thunderstruck, and the official „church“ asked Amos to leave the city. If we read his book today, we could think that it was written for us today in the 21st century. The social injustices which the prophet attacks are still found today.

Who was the prophet Amos?

The title of the book (1:1) tells us that Amos came from Tekoa, a little town in the hill country of Judah, about 18 km south of Jerusalem. It also tells us that the prophet was a shepherd or sheep breeder. 7:10-17 will tell us that the prophet planted and looked after sycamores, fruit trees which belong to the family of the mulberry tree and which produce a fig-like fruit. Amos was a specialist in agriculture, a professional farmer.

His prophetic activity is the result of Yahweh's initiative and call. In fact, Amos is very clear, when he says: „Yahweh took me away from herding the flock, and Yahweh said: Go prophecy to my people Israel“ (7:15). He claims that his prophetic mission is subject to the authority of Yahweh alone. He had never been a prophet before and did not belong to a group or association of prophets (7:14). He could not but speak, because God had spoken to him (3:7-8).

Being a farmer does not mean that Amos was not educated. „Sheepbreeder“ most probably implies that he was in charge of or owned several flocks and that he was a respected and important man of the community. In style and quality his speech is that of a person gifted in the oral arts of his culture. He used riddles, proverbs, folk wisdom, prophetic style (“Thus speaks Yahweh”) and sang a funeral dirge for Israel (5:1-2).

The basic message given to the prophet was: „The end has come for my people Israel“ (8:2).

We can imagine that such a messenger was not very popular and that his message was not accepted. He met opposition from government and church.

When did it happen?

The title of the book (1:1) mentions two kings: Jeroboam II, who reigned Israel from about 786 to 746 B.C., and Uzziah, who reigned Judah from about 790 to 750 B.C. Because of sickness he was replaced by his son Jotham and died in 742 B.C. The records of the two kings appear in 2 Kings 14:23 to 15:7. The title also mentions an earthquake which, however, cannot be dated.

Under Jeroboam II Israel knew her best years of prosperity and peace. Assyria's power had waned, and the kingdom of Damascus (Syria) had not yet recovered from an earlier defeat by Assyria and was at war with Hamath in the North. There was peace with Judah, and Jeroboam II used this situation for a vigorous policy of expansion to the East and the North. In fact, he re-established the Salomonic boundaries of the kingdom.

Along with political success came prosperity and wealth for the ruling class and the rich, but poverty and misery for the poor and ordinary people. Large and expensive houses were built, the temple cult flourished, but the poor were exploited and lived in misery.

What did Amos preach?

The book of Amos can be divided as follows (found in J. Motyer, *The Day of the Lion*, the message of Amos):

Part One: 1:2 to 3:8: The lion roars, a symbol (picture) of divine judgment and punishment.

Part Two: 3:9 to 6:14 : An enemy will invade the country and destroy the „houses“ (the monarchy, the temples, luxury and wealth).

Part Three: 7:1 to 9:15 : The Lord God of Sabaoth is king. The Day of Yahweh.

THE CRIMES THAT YAHWEH ABHORRS.

1. The Oracles against the nations (1:2 to 2:3)

Beside Judah and Israel Amos mentions six neighbouring nations which are responsible for terrible crimes and, therefore, will be punished by God. God is not only the God of Israel, but the God of all nations. Even if they do not have the Law of Moses, they must follow the natural law and respect the human rights.

The crimes mentioned are: War against other nations, torture with different methods, raids in order to capture men and women and to sell them as slaves, attacking innocent people and killing pregnant women, desecrating the tombs of enemy kings.

Do we not find similar crimes today, if we think of the wars in the Middle East, Asia or in some parts of Africa? Do the rich nations not exploit the poorer ones? Amos speaks to the nations of today: Yahweh God roars like a lion and asks all nations to repent and to respect human rights.

2. The Oracles against Judah and Israel (2:4-16, and throughout the book).

The crimes of Judah are mentioned in a very general way: rejection of the law of Yahweh and idolatry (= veneration of false gods).

It is quite different for Israel. Here Amos becomes very precise.

- Exploitation of the poor. The rich bully the poor and sell them into slavery for money or land. 3:6 mentions the sale of slaves for money or „a pair of sandals“, an expression which was used for buying land. The sandals were indicating the price to be paid. It also could mean that a poor person got a loan to buy a pair of sandals, and when unable to pay back, was sold into slavery.
8:4-8 speak of swindlers and exploiters who temper with the scales, decrease the volume of their measures (baskets) by putting in a false bottom, and change the weights in order to sell less food and earn more. They even ask a price for the sweepings of the wheat. After the harvest the poor could come to the fields and collect whatever was left over. Not now anymore. Everything has to be paid.

- An attitude of greed and avarice. „They know nothing of fair dealings“ (3:10) and introduce new levies and taxes (5:11). They look forward to the end of the Sabbath or the end of a feast (new moon) in order to start business and get wealthier still (8:5).
- Corruption among the leaders, particularly the judiciary system. The judges were sitting near the city gates and there pronounced judgment. They were supposed to be independent and neutral, but many of them were bought by the rich, and the innocent suffered. Many times Amos accuses the corruption of the judges (2:7; 5:7,10,12,15; 6:12...).
- Sexual misconduct: 2:7: „Father and son have both resorted to the same girl, profaning my holy name“. The verse refers either to sacred prostitution exercised in the pagan temples or to slavegirls who were sexually abused by father and son and used as concubines.
- A life of luxury and laziness.
3:15: „Your houses of ivory will be destroyed, your houses of ebony will vanish“. Because of the good economic situation the rich built themselves expensive houses whereas the poor had to live in small huts and shanty towns.
In 4:1-3 the prophet speaks against the women of Samaria (the capital of Israel) and calls them the „cows of Bashan“. The region of Bashan was known of producing big and healthy cows. These women of Samaria oppressed the poor and told their husbands: „Bring us something to drink“. The text in 6:4-7 tells us that people were lying on ivory beds, had big dinners, enjoyed music and dance and drank wine by the bowlful. Work was only done by the poor and the slaves.
- Formalism in Religion: The illusion of being close to God.
The religion in Israel had become a state religion which celebrated the national optimism, the wealth and pride of the leaders and their preoccupation with themselves. They wanted to be seen, to boast and show off and adored themselves more than they adored God (4:4-5).
They made gifts to the sanctuary coming from the money which they had taken unjustly from the poor (2:8) or gained through corruption of the courts (5:15). But through the prophet God says: „I hate and despise your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals. When you offer me holocausts, I reject your oblation... Let me have no more of the din of your chanting, no more of your strumming on harps. But let justice flow like water and integrity like an unfailing stream“ (5:21-24). God rejected their cult, because a personal relationship to him was missing and their religion was not put into practice by helping the poor and oppressed.

Is it not true that we find similar weaknesses and sins in our modern society? There still is a terrible gap between the rich and the poor. Some have built huge houses, whereas others live in the compounds. Corruption is found everywhere, and sometimes we wander about our judiciary institution. The attitude of greed is growing, and a new culture of money emerges. A few years ago teachers would come to a workshop, because they received knowledge considered as richness in our traditional culture. Today they want a sitting allowance. During the last rainy season I got stuck with my car. In the past people would come and push me out. They still came, but wanted 20 pin first. I went to buy a bag of

potatoes, and found a good number of stones mixed with them in the bag.

And what about our Church? Isn't there a lot of triumphalism, clericalism and formalism in our celebrations and religion? Do we put in practice what we celebrate on Sundays?

It seems that Yahweh tells us today: „Seek good and not evil so that you may live and that Yahweh, God of Sabaoth, may really be with you as you claim he is. Hate evil, love good, maintain justice at the city gate (= in the courts), and it may be that Yahweh will take pity on the remnant of Joseph“ (5:14-15)

PUNISHMENT WILL COME.

In most of his oracles prophet Amos speaks of disaster and punishment. He uses many different images: darkness, earthquakes, plagues and sicknesses, a swarm of locusts, famine, military invasions, fire and storm, and the leaders and entire populations will be led away into exile.

These events do not predict precise historical events, but today we know that in 721 B.C. Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians, that many were taken into exile to Ninive and that the State of Israel never recovered from the defeat.

The punishment of God is summarized in „the Day of Yahweh“:

„What will this day of Yahweh mean for you? It will mean darkness, not light, as when a man escapes the lion's mouth, only to meet a bear. He enters his house and puts his hand on the wall, only for a snake to bite him. Will not the day of Yahweh be darkness, not light? It will be gloom, without a single ray of light“ (5:18-20). See also 8:9 -14.

IS THERE ANY HOPE?

Yes there is. God calls us to turn around, to repent and to do good. „Seek Yahweh and you will live“ (5:5)

God always remembers his people and invites them to come back (5:14-15; 5:24; 7:1-6; 9:9-15)

Yahweh will not destroy his people completely. The Day of Yahweh is also a day of salvation, when the Lord God will „re-erect the tottering hut of David“(9:11) and make a new covenant with his people.

The last verses of the book of Amos speak of the messianic times to come.

Today -as Christians- we know that these times have come with Jesus Christ. The day of Yahweh is realised on the cross, when Jesus accepts the consequence of sin, when he accepts to be dependent on God and thus reconciles humanity with God. We now have a new covenant, and human kind will be united with God for ever.

In a few weeks from now the African Bishops will come to Rome and discuss the theme of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. I hope and pray that they will roar like a lion, as Amos did, in order to bring justice and peace to Africa and to the world.

Fr.Gotthard Rosner, M.Afr.

FENZA

P.O. Box 320 076

Lusaka, Zambia