

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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AMOS

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Amos 8:4-8, 9:7-12  
James 2:14-26

What is religion? What does it mean? And is it a good thing or not?

These are big, big questions, which people have been asking and attempting to answer for generation upon generation, maybe since recorded time began. As we have been reading in the writings of the prophets this week, they are questions which have been coming up repeatedly, if not in just these words.

This week all or the prophets we read were at work in the time of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The kingdom of Israel was divided in the time of King David's grandson, with ten of the twelve tribes forming the northern kingdom of Israel and two tribes forming the southern kingdom of Judah. In some ways, Judah had the moral high ground, because it had the city of Jerusalem and the temple, which had become central to the worship of God. However, the people of the northern kingdom made shrines for the worship of God at Bethel and Gilgal and in other places. Jerusalem might have had the one great temple, but Israel had many places sacred to the worship of God.

Time passed, the various kings, good or bad came and went in the two kingdoms; the fortunes of the nations rose and fell, rose and fell. Then in the days of Uzziah of Judah, and Jeroboam of Israel, when things were looking pretty good for both of the kingdoms, the shepherd and fig-farmer, Amos, left the south kingdom to bring a word from God to the north. Things were going well there, and along with prosperity, the rituals of religion were being practiced at the various shrines and holy places given over to God. So surely it would be a word of approbation he would bring?

As we read this morning, far from it. Amos begins his work in a way that will lull his listeners into a false sense of security, by pronouncing God's judgement on all the nations which were around Israel, including the sister kingdom of Judah. But then, when they must be feeling pretty pleased with themselves, he weighs into Israel itself, and he does not mince his words. The burden of his prophecy, which is reiterated over and over, is that Israel has the outward form of religion, but has forgotten the righteous heart of it. They are good at turning up at the shrines, at observing the Sabbath day, but they are only going through the motions, their hearts are not in it.

*"When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances."* (Amos 8:5)

So that was one of the things which Amos and other prophets of this era held against God's people: that they did not let their worship affect their lives, that they could do the

rituals of religion without letting the knowledge of God that underlay them come anywhere near touching their hearts or changing their lives. The other thing which we see coming up a lot is a mistaken understanding of what it meant for them to be God's chosen people. Too often the Israelites of both kingdoms lived with the assumption that if they were God's chosen people, God hated all the other peoples of earth, and so should they.

It was a very simplistic understanding of what it meant to be chosen or special. Actually, all through the story of the Exodus, which was when the idea of the people being a nation and being chosen took root, God is telling them that they must welcome the foreigner, that they must make a place for the stranger. Moreover, the history of the nation was littered with God using foreign individuals in pivotal roles to help his people, to bless his people, to lead his people.

There was also the other side of the coin: that these foreigners, whom they were to welcome and treat well, might lead them astray from the true worship of the true God. And this was a real danger, it always is, if people are not themselves engaged heart and soul with God, if their relationship with God is not at the heart of their lives, so that everything they do is part of that relationship, and can only make it closer and stronger. Indeed, God had told them not to be lead astray, but that didn't negate the instruction to welcome and look after those who were not of the nation.

However, over the centuries of their history, the people of God had lurched from one pole to the other: either overly influenced by those who lived around and among them, or else clinging desperately to their "special" status. Amos had words for them about this words which would have been totally shocking:

*"Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt"*

– yes they knew that, this was the foundational event of their history, the one which showed they were special.

*"And the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?"*

These nations who are in the lands around Israel, who are sometimes allies but sometimes enemies, they also have been given their lands by God, they also have been helped by him, led by him, and are special to him.

When children are small they sometimes ask "Which of us is your favourite, Mummy?" And any good mother answers "I couldn't pick a favourite, because I love you all; you are all my favourites." Which is an answer the children cannot really believe or understand, not being parents themselves. It is also not what they want to hear, because every child wants to believe that they are the one that the parent secretly loves best. But it was also God's answer to the Israelites, which they, in their childishness, could not, or would not understand. They had to be the special ones, the only special ones.

What is religion? What is it for? And is it a good thing?

The answer that the prophets of the eighth century before Christ would give, is that religion is for finding out the heart of God and living in his way, with justice and steadfast love. If it is used in any other way or becomes any other thing, if it becomes a form with

less than this as its content, if it becomes an excuse for hatred, or for ill-treating others, if it becomes a way of justifying selfishness, then it is not a good thing.

James is one of the prophets of the New Testament who comes very close to saying the same things as the prophets of Amos' time did. In the passage we read, the most controversial and most often misunderstood of his letter, James is making the point that religion that does not change how we live, and how we treat others, is no religion at all. If we say we believe in God and think that is all that is needed, then we delude ourselves. As he says "even the demons believe – and shudder." In other words, the demons know that to believe in God is to believe in a force of ultimate and complete goodness, who expects nothing less from us.

There has always been a tendency among Christians, as there was amongst the Israelites to whom Amos spoke, to emphasise right belief. You have to believe in Jesus, yes, but you have to believe exactly this about Jesus, about how he saves, about just how the crucifixion achieves our redemption (which is a vast and difficult subject full of many opinions). I know that I certainly grew up with the unspoken understanding that what mattered was believing in the right way, which in turn leads to the expectation that everyone's faith will sound the same and be worked out in the same way. People and churches who think this way tend to have a very narrow view of who is a real Christian. (I am reminded of a friend of mine who recently told me that she thought that in fact there were some Christians in the Church of Scotland, this in defiance of the leaders of the small church she attends who would say otherwise! Yes, we are still friends.)

James, who as Jesus' brother might be expected to want people to believe just the way he does, tells us that if we think this way, we have things back to front. It is how our faith affects our lives, it is how our faith changes how we treat people that matters. If we are full of knowledge and right belief, full of theology and Scriptural texts, but we haven't allowed that to turn us from self-centredness to generosity, then what good are they to us? In that case these things, which are good – it is good to learn about God and know what the Bible says and to be sure of what we believe – but if these things do not change our behaviour, then they in fact become part of the burden of our wrongfulness, as they become ends in themselves and matters for pride.

What is religion? What is it for? And is it a good thing? James has an answer to these questions, found a few verses before the passage we read. He says this:

*"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."* (James 1:27)

In other words, true, pure religion, religion that is worth its salt, will motivate us to care for those who cannot care for themselves, and at the same time to keep an eye to our own hearts and lives, lest the charitable acts we may perform with one hand, as it were, are negated by the way that we conduct the rest of our lives, the way we talk, the way we think. But if we are engaged heart and soul with God, if our relationship with God is at the heart of our lives, so that everything we do is part of that relationship, and can only make it closer and stronger, then we will keep unstained by the world; and our religion, which is the practice of our faith, will be a good thing, as it will be for the benefit of others. Amen.