Sermon on Proper 16 Year C 2019
(Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:38-42)

Perhaps you remember the scene, Queen Elizabeth sitting outside at a table signing it; Pierre Trudeau sitting at the same table beaming, occasionally putting his hand over his balding head as faux protection from the rain?

Today you can go to the National Archives in Ottawa and see the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982, including the smudge marks caused by the falling rain.

This and other documents are rarely read and considered by the average Canadian though they have a large and ongoing effect on our everyday lives.

The same dynamic is at play when we consider a book like Amos; a small piece of writing from deep in the iron age.

This little book; with its jumbled imagery sounds ominous and threatening and yet we continue to owe it a great debt; its message has shaped worlds, including ours; yet for it’s inclusion in the Lectionary, and that only in bits, and those bits only heard by so few, it would never be heard or read at all!

Amos is one of the first pieces of Hebrew writing we have; early books like Genesis and Exodus probably contain tales that are just as old but they continued to be edited to a date later than Amos.

Amos’ time was marked by great change; to the south Egypt conquered its immediate neighbour Nubia and inaugurated the 25th dynasty; to the east, the Assyrian empire came to the height of its power, disastrously so for Israel

And to the west, on a series of small hills, a tiny village sprung up: Rome. It was during this period that Homer was writing his great epics, *The Odyssey* and *the Iliad,* the founding mythology of Greece.

And in Israel, a shepherd and tender of sycamore trees inaugurated the change that out of all I’ve mentioned still affects you and I the most: the idea that no one on earth, no one from amongst God’s chosen people, including the King, is above the laws of social justice, the laws of equity and fairness.

In liberal democracies we refer to this in the pithy latin phrase lex rex; lex for law, rex for king; the law is king. Until Amos’ time the normal way societies were structured, including Greece and Rome, by the way, was rex lex, the king is the law!

But Amos inspired, Jews and Christians believe, by God’s Spirit, understood that if all human beings are made in God’s image, not just the King, then laws of social justice, must by virtue of that truth, be, next to God, King!

This idea, this reality is, of course challenged constantly and consistently by forces that seek to subjugate and oppress for the sake of power and privilege.

There will never be a time, when, at some level, powerful interests and leaders aren’t trying to subvert this sense that we are all the Image of God.

We will always be “on the way” seeking “a more perfect union” always learning about which groups still are marginalized, which groups of people still need to fully find a home in God’s Loving Justice but the task itself was set here, in this small book!

Why Amos is so important in this regard isn’t immediately apparent from the words of today’s reading; language like “the end has come;” “the dead shall be many” and “I will bring sackcloth on all loins and baldness on every head” are off-putting at the best of times, even if you don’t, as I do, have male-pattern baldness! (Baldness is becoming a theme!)

Connecting language of violence to God, to a God we’ve come to understand, in and through Jesus Christ, as a God of love and compassion, is a heavy burden for us and doesn’t seem connected to lex rex.

We’ve come to understand that language, especially biblical language that is violent needs to be understood in terms of the principles it’s trying to unhold or teach not for the particular picture it paints.

But in this case, to put not too fine a point on it, Amos painted an accurate portrait of Israel! He claimed not to be a prophet or the son of a prophet but the Assyrians really did come and ravage the northern kingdom of Israel and wreak the very devastation he predicted!

They could do so because of the blindness of greed; when the wealthy fail to share, they weaken the supply chain, of food, of creativity, of initiative. And if the priests and prophets go along with this status quo by saying things that sound morally insightful yet are actually blinding the people, then the people are so weak they have no strength left to fight when the horror descends.

This helps us make sense of what sounds strange to us: Amos’ claim that the greatest of catastrophes is not some sort of physical disaster like a famine or drought but a famine of words from God.

If we imagine that the ones preparing us to live well in the world, preparing us for strength of character, for the moral resolve to make sacrifices for the sake of the wider community are actually helping us oppose God’s will then it will be as if God no longer speaks!

Then it will be that we are directionless and vulnerable to whatever the powerful blather on about. Any of this sounding familiar; any of it have a contemporary ring?

What does it look like to listen to the genuine word of God within a culture where sometimes communities of faith still say that it is “God’s will” that some get rich at the expense of others.

Where some preach the gospel of “now” without considering what is ultimately best for the generations to come and for the nation, for the world as a whole?

How does the Church, which know longer has Amos’ worldview and will not, if it is wise, use violent images, nevertheless work to strengthen our society, to heal the relationship between economics and fairness; between religion and politics?

Our gospel might not immediately seem to provide much help. This story has often been used to highlight a certain type of contemplative spirituality over and against “activism.”

But I think Luke’s concern is more profound and potentially helpful.

In Jewish society at the time, “to sit at the feet of a teacher” was a proverbial way of speaking about the type of relationship a follower had with his Rabbi.

Notice I said, “his Rabbi.” It was expressly forbidden for a woman to follow a Rabbi; this because to be accepted as a student by a Rabbi, to sit at his feet and learn from him, meant that you were planning to be a Rabbi yourself!

There was no thought of learning for learning sake. In this story Mary has quietly taken her place as a would-be teacher and preacher of the Kingdom of God and Jesus affirms right to do so in a very powerful way, saying that her nervy move is better than simply accepting the role culture has assigned.

Like Amos who took the courage to break through his lower station to speak truth to power; so Mary takes the courage to break through the social boundary assigned to her.

God speaks and saves when we take the risk of moving across some uncomfortable ground toward the truth; when we discover as we do that God has indeed called us, though we be mere dressers of sycamore trees, mere church attenders, mere clergy.

I said this last week, that far from an escape religion is meant precisely for the immense adventure of awakening to God and the world and just so, awakening to the present possibilities of love, healing, forgiveness and hope for ourselves!

Sometimes the move across a boundary is right in front of us, visiting someone in the hospital, taking the courage to have that conversation you’ve been avoiding with your son or daughter, with your partner.

Sitting in quiet, like Mary, can be a profound action of trust in the goodness of the divine being. I don’t know what boundary God is calling you, calling us to cross, but in this Eucharist, Christ is here to illumine such.

When we join ourselves to Amos and Mary, to all who’ve journeyed to God’s justice and joy at this table, then my friends we’re not just signing a charter, reading an ancient parchment that once shaped worlds, now we’re taking steps beyond the station we’ve been told is suitable, now we begin living the freedom that Amos first promised. Amen.