

What shall I do . . ? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg . . . I know what I shall do . . .

One day way back in the 700's BC, i.e. twenty seven hundred years ago, a somewhat shaggy-looking man named Amos climbed the steps of the Temple of Bethel in Israel to confront its high priest. Amos claimed not to be a prophet, someone ordained to uphold the traditional creed of Moses; he was rather a *concerned* shepherd. His concern was that the royalty and clergy of that Mosaic tradition were living in contradiction of it – materialists like every other nation, compromising their sense of creation's worth, disguising nature as an assembly of manipulable gods and thereby becoming themselves a manipulable people.

That the leaders of Israel were becoming materialists should not be surprising, considering that their ancestors settled long ago in what we still call the Fertile Crescent. It was that stretch of coastal land facing west which, by contrast with the vast Arabian desert to the east, was moistened and thus made fertile by Mediterranean breezes and linked to great rivers to its south and north. In other words it was a crossroads of commerce from every direction, configured around productive urban centers and as such they evolved into upper and lower classes, with slaves to handle the labor.

In other words (again) - unlike their ancestors who long ago lived as slaves in Egypt, many a new aristocrat and merchant of Amos's time could "flaunt it" – as Zero Mostel might say. Indeed they were restive, not wanting to let a day pass when they could increase their wealth. They found "days of rest" – holidays – intrusive: *when will the Sabbath end so we can display our wares*. [How many ads pop up all over the Internet every minute, every second of everyday?] Or they were savvy enough to lower the weight of something but maintain the full price or sell leftovers at the original price of fresh items or buy a foreclosed home at the lowest possible bid. Petty examples but writ large! [Have times really changed? Or simply magnified out of all proportion?]

Read the Book of Amos in the Bible to savor his warnings. About thirty years after Amos confronted Bethel's high priest the Kingdom of Israel was wiped out by a bigger and militaristic economic power, its inhabitants transported far and wide – to be referred to as the ten lost tribes of Israel.

The Amos of today's first reading is not just a distant voice addressing a past situation. His words have current application – it is to us that he can say in the name of all creation: *Take away from me your noisy songs; / the melodies of your harps, / I will not listen to them. / Rather let justice surge like waters, / and righteousness like an unfailing stream*.

Regarding today's Gospel parable, cheating (though condemned by Amos) gets a reluctant *honorable mention* from the employer whose steward ripped him off. Ultimately, he commends the dismissed cheater for *using his imagination* to survive. The parable seconds that commendation, wishing that all true believers may become more creatively imaginative themselves when it comes to reverencing and saving our world.

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