

Amos 8. 1-12

Psalms 52

Luke 10. 25-38

The end has come upon my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by.
The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day,'
says the Lord God;
'the dead bodies shall be many,
cast out in every place.

Speaking in the name of Yahweh, the prophet Amos is searing and uncompromising in his judgement. In a moment in our time when the public discourse is bristling with accusations of anti-Semitism of anyone who is critical of the present Israeli government and the IDF to read this text at this time is to be prompted to ask the question is this Amos a self-hating Jew; a self-loathing Jew? Is this an antisemitic text?

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.
Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who lives in it,

It is risky to speak at this time – for just Jews and non-Jews alike. Everywhere there are efforts to silence and suppress questions, to stifle debate, about what Israel is doing in Gaza and the West Bank; more especially, what is happening there, clearly, with deliberate intent. And as we pray and plumb ancient Hebrew texts each week, I find myself conflicted; I plumb these texts seeking to see glimpses of the God more fully disclosed to us in Jesus. Others, it seems, plumb the texts for a terrible, death-dealing exceptionalism, Jews and Christians alike.

The prophet Amos is unmuzzled and speaks with utter clarity. Amos lived in the eighth century BC. At this time the Hebrew nation was divided into two parts, two kingdoms. Judah in the south; centred on Jerusalem. And Israel in the north; its capital Samaria. Amos is not a prophet by calling; he is not part of the religious, even political elite; he says he is a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. But he is called: *go, prophesy to my people*. Within time, the northern kingdom of Israel is overrun by the Assyrians, the empire to the north.

We know that what is taking place in Israel now is genocide; there is evil intent in what is taking place and yet world leaders seem powerless to stem what has been unleashed and our own Australian leaders fumble and mumble, unable to find unambiguous language to be able to be clear, both to the Australian Jewish community and to the Australian population more generally. Although, maybe in just in the last 24 hours the PM is speaking more clearly.

Attacks on synagogues and places of Jewish community life are unacceptable, as they are toward any ethnic or religious minority in Australia, this miraculous multi-cultural melting pot. I cannot help but feel that there is overreach in accusing us of having an anti-Semitic problem. When Germans in WWII were committing genocide, did Australians mumble about the evil taking place,

because to criticize the Nazis would be to condemn all Germans? When Pol Pot was ravaging Cambodia, killing two million of the educated and elite of that nation, did we fall silent because to criticise that regime would be to condemn all Cambodians? No!

Melbourne has a particular Jewish character, unlike any other city in the world. Apart from Israel, we had the largest population of Holocaust survivors in the world. And now of course their children and their grandchildren. In recent years a field of scientific study has emerged known as epigenetics – its partly genetics, part physiology, part psychology. It is a study of changes to the way genes behave in people subjected to profound trauma; changes which are passed down from parent to child, without the actual DNA of the genes being changed. These are brought about by circumstances or events or privations in people's lives. And then passed down.

An American neuroscientist, Dr Rachel Yehuda, has spent decades studying the effect of trauma on veterans and Holocaust survivors. She and her colleagues showed that epigenetic changes caused by exposure to trauma can be passed on to children born after the event—in this case Holocaust survivors and their adult children. Epigenetic processes alter the expression of a gene without producing changes in the DNA sequence - and can be transmitted to the next generation. Yehuda identified these inherited characteristics in a stress gene linked to PTSD, depression, and mood and anxiety disorders. The results suggest that Holocaust exposure had an effect that was observed in parents exposed to the horrors of the concentration camps, as well as their offspring, many of whom showed signs of depression and anxiety.

We have two Jewish friends, women in their 70s now, who were at school together, so have known each other for nearly 60 years. Each seems to have a different take on the Israel and Palestine question. One is an avowed Zionist, and strident about it; the other is less clear, less zealous. The Zionist wants to know what friends' position on the October 7th attack by Hamas are. There is only one right position; so beware, friends have come to know.

What gets played out in interactions with her seems to be a demand to acknowledge, because of her Jewishness, a victimhood which is above all other victimhoods, while overlooking the atrocities which have unfolded in the past two years in Gaza and the West bank.

But knowing what is known about epigenetics and the impacts of sustained trauma on the offspring of trauma sufferers it is possible to understand the collective anxiety of such a large community of Holocaust survivors in this city and country when there are acts against them.

I have wondered to myself, are we really an anti-Semitic nation; certainly, as Australians we laconically lapse into racism from time to time, or events scratch the surface revealing beneath a capacity for racism that takes little to unleash. We certainly saw it in the creeping meanness of the Voice referendum. The she'll be right veneer of the fair go, easily flips to: no way.

I have had to search myself to know whether there is a lurking antisemitism within me. I have a Jewish history. Of sorts. My father worked in the Rag trade in Flinders Lane from the early 1930s until 1972. Flinders lane was the commercial heart of Jewish Melbourne. He was embroiled in that world. His boss for at least 20 years was a Jewish man, a worshipper at the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation on St Kilda Rd. My father used to refer to Jews as "my mob". At some level he considered himself one of them. He had a big kronk which meant he would have fitted in. But there was also a kind of racism there too. So an awareness, of our world intersecting with Jewish Melbourne was in the ether I breathed as a child. But it was never what you would call overtly

racist, wishing them harm. My father was aware of a particular character to doing business with Jewish people, as there was in doing business with a Dutchman or an American; sometimes charming, sometimes difficult.

But back to the text. Like Amos, John the Baptist, made searing critique of the religious leaders of his time, the world into which Jesus was born: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

And Jesus says: By your fruits you shall know them.

Amos is shown a basket of summer fruit. Fruit ripe and harvested. It seems to make little sense with what follows. But in Hebrew the expression a basket of summer fruit is a play on words; a double-entendre. The word for fruit resembles the word for death. A basket of death; a ripe harvest of death. Amos is naming the culture of death which surrounds him:

And we glide over the words easily but this judgement on the lips of Amos is a judgement which threatens the erasure of what it means to be God's people

The end has come upon my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by.

Their identity as God's people – their liberation from slavery in Egypt - was rooted in them being passed by; passed over by the angel of death. But not this time. Not for these acts, this erring from God's way, declares Amos.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, '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 practise deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.'

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely, I will never forget any of their deeds.

What has come to light this week about the attack on the Abass Israel synagogue late last year is that who ever ordered and funded the attack is hidden behind layers of encrypted text messages. Their identity at this point is still completely unknown – behind a veil police have not been able to penetrate.

What I do find in myself at this time is an impediment to me having moral clarity, indeed rage, about what has and continues to take place in Gaza. I have only become aware of this impediment as I have heard Jews, both residents of Israel and elsewhere in the world, like Amos,

express uncompromising outrage and opposition to what is taking place there. As I hear them or read them, I feel I suddenly have permission to be incensed about what is taking place. What is that about, I have wondered, this lack of permission. I believe it is about the projected identity of victimhood. The story that because we have suffered as a people, you cannot criticise us. I feel it in myself and I recognise it in the fudging of leaders of both political and religious hue. They dare not speak with clarity.

Tim Hollo, a Jewish-Australian writer, musician, environmentalist and philosopher published a piece last Sunday in response to the report by Australia's Special Envoy to Combat Anti-Semitism, Jillian Segal. Hollo wrote: *My Jewishness is a Jewishness that says, as the Passover Haggadah says, "as we have been oppressed, we must never oppress the other"*.

My Jewishness is a Jewishness that says, when we have privilege, even if we understand that privilege to be fragile, tenuous, conditional, (indeed especially then), we must use our privilege to support and uplift others less privileged than us.

Along with unconditional love, a deep, epigenetic trauma, and a passion for mashed potato, my beloved holocaust-survivor grandparents passed on to me the clear understanding that antisemitism flourishes in times of distress.

They taught me that this means that none of us will ever be safe until all are safe.

It seems incredibly obvious to me that the exceptionalism that runs so deeply through the antisemitism envoy's [Jillian Segal] recommendations is guaranteed to make our lives as Jews less safe.

The theologian James Alison writes of Jesus as *Jesus the forgiving victim*. In the gospels, the events of the Passion play out in the very human pattern of scapegoating, victimisation and murder. Jesus is the victim; for Christians the divine victim. But he returns. James Alison says that in his returning Jesus is the forgiving victim. And he writes that in his returning he doesn't so much forgive the disciples for their abandonment and betrayal but that he is forgiveness; returns as forgiveness, evident in his hands and side.

Our communities are always peppered with people who have suffered, some with much deeper and life-changing trauma than others. Some with trauma which is passed from parent to child. How is that trauma born, carried in their bones? As victims; or as people who have found grace, forgiveness, a tentative wholeness. Is their experience of trauma wielded and weaponised against others, expecting us to excuse and pity them? And in that demand, silencing us? This is a very human pattern in the face of suffering; individual and collective. What do we do with it? Who are we in the face of it?

The one we follow – the forgiving victim – has shown us a new and life-giving way, one where grace and the possibility that violence and death does not have the last word but that the grace of God may erupt into our world and peace be found. May this grace take root in our bones and we be like green olive trees in the house of God.

Andrew Boyle