

St Patrick 2019
(Amos 7: 12-15 / Luke 5: 1-11)
17.03.2019

It is the Lord's way to choose ordinary men and women to be heralds of His extraordinary message of life.

In today's gospel we see how He chose simple fishermen to be His apostles. They would become fishers of men and women. They were to be the Lord's chosen instruments to win others to the gospel.

In today's first reading we are given to see how he chose another very ordinary man to speak in His name. Like most of the prophets when they were called, the prophet Amos protested his lack of qualifications for the task confided to him. We are told that he was but a humble shepherd, one who tended flocks, and who, at the same time, was a dresser of sycamore trees. The point we must grasp is that it is God's way to choose ordinary folk to be His witnesses.

Today we give thanks for Patrick the extraordinary Apostle to the Irish – St Patrick who is hailed the world today as *Glorious*. We must remember that this glorious apostle to the Irish first held that lowest of ranks in society, serving as a slave, when he lived as a captive herdsman on Slemish Mountain, just off the Antrim coast.

Given the need of our own age for a renewed prophetic voice to resound in the Irish Church, I thought I would concentrate my biblical reflection this morning above all on Amos' ministry. I believe it is particularly relevant for where we are at in the life of the Irish Church and nation at this point in our history.

God called Amos, the shepherd of Tekoa, to be His prophet to Israel at a time when she had lost her way. He confided to this simple man the proclamation of a message of repentance, asking him to assure the people that mercy would be shown to them and new life given to them, on condition that they change their ways.

The first thing Amos had to do was to point out to the people, in all honesty, just what a lamentable state they were in.

God's message relayed through His prophet was clear: if only God's people would admit to their sin and ask for forgiveness, the Lord would purify their hearts and completely restore their lives.

I'm convinced that we need to hear that message in Ireland today.

I believe this message speaks to the Irish Church – and nation – at this time of crisis for God's people right across this land. In a special way I cannot but think of our local Church here in Dromore, bereft as it is of an episcopal shepherd. I recall how our Diocesan Church is placed under the patronage of St Patrick and St Colman. The icon placed in the church today, to mark this feast, depicts Patrick and Colman together: one is holding the Book of the Gospels and the others our cathedral church. This image placed in our church today for our veneration reminds us to pray in a special way at this time for the Diocese of which we are part.

The bottom line of Amos' prophecy is that if God's people are to experience a new surge of life, a fresh outpouring of the Spirit and restored vigour, then they need to begin by coming to an awareness of and humble confessing to their poverty and helplessness.

We could say that when the Lord looks upon His Church today (not only here in Ireland, but the world over – just think of the pain of the Church in Australia at this time in the light of

recent events there), He sees how her testimony has been tarnished and her credibility weakened... and yet, He still calls upon her to bear witness to His gospel, His message of Good News and true life.

The Lord awaits from us that we call out to Him, asking Him to display His saving help.

In Amos' day, Israel was a prosperous nation, but with her prosperity came corruption, a forgetfulness of the call to be just and upright in her dealings with the poor and helpless.

What Amos was called to denounce in Israel is something the Church in this land chose to pass over in silence all too often: unfairness in relationships, a lack of understanding and mercy in regard to those who longed for and had every right to expect from what we call *mother Church* signs of tender compassion.

Would it be an exaggeration to say that the once apparent strength of the Church in Ireland – and in other places in the world such as the USA and Australia – led to an arrogance and unquestioned exercise of power over people's lives at so many levels? The Church's control of so many aspects of the life of the nation – not only the lives of her faithful adherents, but the whole population – has no doubt contributed to the kind of reactions we have seen awakened in so many to her abuses of power. As a result, the Church has taken a battering. There is no doubt that the Church in Ireland is left reeling because of the many scandals which have come to light. She is badly bruised and deeply wounded.

In the light of the paschal mystery – the lens through which Christians are called to assess all things – let me dare to suggest that the enfeebled state in which the Irish Church finds herself at this time offers her a golden opportunity to come to her senses and, as a result, experience a fresh outpouring of grace. The whole logic of the Christian gospel is that it is precisely by passing through the pain of humiliation that God's people are exalted. He raises up those who are laid low. It is always through death that we are led into the experience of resurrection.

Understand me.

I am not saying that the Irish Church always had it easy. It didn't. Persecution and oppression was the Church's lot for centuries of Irish history, but the Irish Church did get it quite easy for many generations and especially throughout the last century. This corresponds to the period during which so much of the abuse that has marred her story took place. The Irish Church knew good days, heydays, for decades. She held a privileged place in society – to the extent of being able to dictate the terms in regard to so much in the life of the State. While this was particularly true in regard to south of the border, it actually applied right across the land.

What some might still think of and hanker after as *the good old days* were, in fact, not so good at all! In the past when a bishop or a priest or a Religious spoke all jumped to attention; all listened humbly and obeyed subserviently. Decrees were issued and put into practice and there was no room for discussion.

Amos' whole prophecy points to the danger that comes during times when life is apparently going smoothly. Amos was raised up to tell Israel that it was precisely as she prospered that she needed to be careful. In his wisdom – God's wisdom imparted to him – Amos recognised that while the Lord's people were prospering they were in danger. He pointed out how prosperity can become a reason for complacency. He knew that all too easily prosperous people can slide into corruption. Popular wisdom reminds us *the higher we climb the greater the fall will be* when we topple or are pulled down.

Amos' bottom line at all times is that we need God. We need Him when life is going well. We need Him when life is difficult. What is absolutely vital is that we guard ourselves from the temptation of complacent self-sufficiency. Such an attitude is a recipe for disaster.

Amos also insists throughout his prophecy that the outward appearances of religion alone just won't do. These will never suffice, if we have abandoned true faith in God. Simply going through the motions of religion has never saved anybody and never will.

The danger when all looks well on the outside, and our obsession is just *keeping up appearances*, is to hide our failures from others – what has rightly been referred to by so many in our own day and age as *cover-up*.

We can pretend to be faithful and yet devoid of true faith. True faith entails a living relationship with the Lord.

The give-away sign that true faith is missing in a person's or an institution's life will always be a lack of love. It will be a harshness in their dealings with others, a hardness of heart when confronted with other people's moral failures, coupled with a readiness to overlook their own.

Amos is clear in his prophecy. He states unequivocally that the Lord sees through falsity and show – even if other people (and maybe even the guilty themselves) fail to do so.

What interests God is our good and that means that what really interests Him is the state of our hearts. It is this that led Amos the simple herdsman to declare to Israel all that he felt obliged to proclaim. One thinks of these lines from chapter 5 of his prophecy – lines to the nation's corrupt religious leaders who thought they had covered things up well: *Many and great are your sins. I know them so well.* But, this is not all the prophet had to say. Amos went on to speak of hope for the future. Every true prophetic voice will herald not only condemnation of what is wrong, but hope in what is right for the future. I quote from that same chapter 5 of the Book of Amos: *Be good, flee evil and live! The Lord, the Lord Almighty, will truly be your Helper.*

Lines from Pope Benedict's Letter to the Church in Ireland come to mind this morning. I think it is worth referring to them today. I quote: *It is my conviction that in order to recover from her grievous wounds the Church in Ireland must first acknowledge before the Lord and before others the serious sins committed against defenceless children. Such acknowledgement must be accompanied by sincere sorrow for the damage caused.* Reflecting on the role of Ireland's many saints (a reflection it seems only right to allude to today as we celebrate St Patrick) Pope Benedict expressed his hope that *having overcome the present crisis, the Church in Ireland may once more offer convincing witness to the truth and Good News of Almighty God made manifest in His Son Jesus Christ.*

A similar message to those words of Pope Benedict were reiterated by the present Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis, during last year's trip to the World Meeting of Families in Ireland. He also exhorted God's people in this land to reflect upon the wounds inflicted upon Christ's body.

Talking of these wounds in his *Letter to the Irish Church* – a letter too few paid heed to – Pope Benedict went on to speak of the *sometimes painful remedies needed to bind and heal the wounds of the Church* in this land. He insisted upon *a need for unity, charity and mutual support among us as we engage ourselves in the long term process of restoration and ecclesial renewal.*

Finally, he spoke prophetically of his *confidence of a rebirth of the Church in Ireland in the fullness of God's own truth*, reminding us that *it is the truth that will set us free.*

It is good for us to be reminded of the call to freedom on this day when we celebrate Patrick who was once held captive as a slave here in Ireland, and who, after encountering the One who is the Truth, was sent to proclaim to people of our land the gospel of freedom by which we are called to live our lives today.

Amen!