

## *Measurement*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Sunday 11th July 2004, Pentecost 6

*Amos 7.7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1.1-14; Luke 10.25-37*

In morning prayer... the service starts with an attempt by us to measure ourselves... to measure faults so that in coming here they might be changed.

In building you need various instruments to measure... a right angle to get the corners right.

The walls... need to be vertical... straight up, not leaning and not buckling.... How to test? get a lump of lead or tin and a string.... Fred used a hexagonal nut when he was building our house....

Amos was a prophet who saw things.

He saw, and seeing isn't always easy. Most of what we see is in our minds, not from what the optic nerve picks out. We know what we think our world is, and we see it the way we want to. It takes a lot to shake our world enough so that we see in different ways.

Amos saw the plumb line. He saw the Lord, measuring the wall with the plumb line in his hand. Measuring; and he said he was putting a plumb line in the midst of his people....

Measuring. How do we measure up?

Amaziah measured up: he was a member of the guild; he spoke with the king; he was a priest of Bethel....

Amos didn't measure up. He was not a prophet, or a prophet's son. He earned his living in the scrubby wilderness of Judah. But he saw: and what Amos saw he spoke.

He saw the rich lying idle on their beds of ivory: eating and drinking to their hearts content. He saw the needy being trampled, the poor being ruined, the merchants greedy for the holiday to be over so that they could make more money (with their crooked balances).

Amos foresaw the results of this injustice and proclaimed the coming doom and exile. On Amaziah he pronounces shame, death, loss of land; and... for a priest a degrading thing.... death in an unclean land far away....

How do we measure up? What is the plumb line to use to check our verticality?

In a society like Australia you might say the "rule of law" is such a measure; things like: *habeas corpus*, not imprisoning innocent people, not imprisoning children... various United Nations Declarations that we sign (or, like Kyoto) that we don't sign. Or, the various ways the Parliament can itself investigate with committees, or the actions that citizens take to challenge government.

A society can organise itself this way, but it still takes people who can see to see what is happening. Pray for new eyes for seeing! Pray for prophets like Tony Kevin.

But for ourselves? What was it that the lawyer asked Jesus? "What must I do to inherit eternal life? (Not "pie in the sky" but real honest to goodness life. as Jesus said

later: "Do this and you shall live.") He is looking for a standard. Of course he already knows it. And Jesus knows that he knows it.

The Sh'ma "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one..." He stands and recites it every morning... and he gives Jesus the abbreviated version:

"...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."

Yes, says Jesus, "do this, and you will live"

This lawyer is a good yeshiva boy, he knows what to do...

Church on Sunday (on time)... don't touch dead bodies... don't get polluted... don't be a polluter... don't be late for appointments... always brush your teeth... say thank you... don't eat pork.... all the little rules and regulations. they make sure you keep the big ones...

He knows what to do.

But he is a good yeshiva boy. He learnt his lessons well. and, still he digs, burrowing into the argument...

Yeshiva school: you can hear it: the boys arguing their way through their lessons. Students paired off to learn to argue! such noise!

So the lawyer: He just has to ask another question.... as if he didn't know that Mr Salomon next door was his neighbour... he just had to ask....

"Who is my neighbour?". And it isn't answered by another question! Jesus answers with a story.

I didn't want to re-tell this story. But it's too good. and its a parable. and they are weird. don't assume that you know it. You're going from Jerusalem, down to Jericho...

from the hill country down through the barren rocky crags down to the Jordan valley... almost to sea level (or lower)

country that barely has sycamore bushes growing in it - just enough for a few goats and the families who live from them (and from the pickings they get off rich travellers along this road...) this is bandit country...

So it happens... "inshallah!" bandits rob you and beat you up....

someone comes close... he can't stop; you might be dead already and he has to be 'clean', pure... he can't get purified in time before he has to do whatever...such a pity; but, well, a little prayer maybe?

Someone else hurries by, but he is too busy looking at his watch, maybe... must never be late for an appointment you know.

Then a little donkey plodding by with its stuff and trinkets maybe... and the merchant stops and binds up your wounds and carries you off to the inn....

Now, which one was your neighbour? he one who kept the religious laws and did his duty? The one who had important business and couldn't be late? Or the one who plods by and picks you up... who doesn't care who you are, or what you are — he just does it... and he is the one you would never have had anything to do with.

You would never have seen him at work, he wasn't at school with you, you wouldn't even have bought his trinkets — yesterday, you would have passed him in the street as if he wasn't there.

And this time, Jesus asks the question and the lawyer has to give the answer.

Who was neighbour to this man? "The one who showed mercy." The Samaritan!

No, I don't mean one of those English Life Line telephone counsellors...and I don't mean someone we might call a "Good Samaritan".

The one who showed mercy was from a group descended from invaders, mixed with the remnant who didn't get exiled. They had messed up the pure religion centred in Jerusalem... they were apostates... heretics... followed a garbled imitation of the true faith.

He wasn't entirely "other". He wasn't totally "different". But he was despised, beneath contempt. Like the woman at the well. Jesus spoke with her, discussed religion even, but then that was Jesus, wasn't it... the disciples wouldn't. they kept the rules a bit better than he did.

And this story, well, this story is a parable. It turns the world on its head. You think you know all the answers. You think you know how to measure life, goodness, justice, mercy ... too often such measurements make boundaries and fences. Things we know too much about. Fences to keep out suicide bombers; watery boundaries to keep us "safe" ...

Jews put a fence around the Torah. This was all the little rules, that tried to make sure that those big commandments, the ones about loving god, were kept—

little rules that mounted up and enclosed God and love in a box. A box that life needed to burst out of.

"A saviour without safety, a tradesman without tools. Has come to tip the balance with fishermen and fools...." Enjoy singing that last hymn with words by John Bell.

Where are the fruits of justice? Where are the signs of peace? When is the day when prisoners and dreams find their release. It's not more rules we want, but a plumb line from a God who broke the rules and loved life and showed us how to love.