

## Let Justice Flow: Thirsting for Justice World Development Appeal 2011

### Theological reflections

Over the next few years, the World Development Appeal is taking as its theme the call for a rebuilding of just and rightly ordered relationships, within and among the human communities living together on this earth. As the prophet Amos pronounces the word of the Lord:

*Stop your noisy songs;  
I do not want to listen to your harps.  
Instead, let justice flow like a stream,  
and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.*

*Amos 5:23-24 [Good News Translation]*

The book of the prophet Amos is generally understood to have had its origins in the 8th century before the birth of Christ. This was a time of prosperity for many, and one which also provided sufficient political security for people to be able to engage in critical reflection on their own social and economic circumstances to a greater degree than might have been possible in more chaotic or uncertain times.

And what some of them saw when they took the time to look was an ever-increasing demand for luxury goods (6:4 ff, for example), accompanied by an ever more tightly drawn equation between material prosperity and human worth. Thus, even within the sphere of religious practice, material wealth was seen to confer advantage (4:4 ff), and the poor were treated with growing contempt (2:6 ff). And in an image which is wrenchingly familiar to us, the privileged often took the view that the law was for other people, and thus did not allow their own behaviour to be constrained either by the courts or by any fear of the Lord.

Into this context comes Amos, who is a breeder of sheep (1:1), and also has what we might call some market gardening interests (7:14). He is therefore not a poor man himself, and emphasises that he is not a prophet by profession. The implication is that he cannot be “bought”, but also that he is taking time out from his own legitimate business and farming interests to speak a message that, by the call of God, has become so compelling to him that he cannot keep silent.

In the biblical tradition, of course, a prophet is not so much someone who is able to predict the future as someone who is able to see and understand the present with an often unnerving clarity. This clear-sightedness can include being able to see the implications, for an individual or a society, of continuing on their present course, even after its dangers have been pointed out to them.

And so Amos was forthright about what he saw: people manipulating the legal process at the expense of the poor and attempting to silence any who spoke out on their behalf (2:6 ff; 5:10 ff); the unjust acquisition of land, houses, and vineyards (5:11); and the obliviousness of the wealthy to the suffering of those who had been deprived of their livelihood (6:1-8). Injustice had become so pervasive, and the behaviour of some so shocking, that it was hardly

possible for the righteous to speak. So much damage had been done; what could anyone say in response that would make any difference? Perhaps it was only possible for the righteous to be silent, and wait for God's judgment (5:13).

However, it is the vocation of the prophet to speak. And by the power of God's Spirit, Amos speaks, then and now. The prophet makes no secret of God's anguish and anger that the people whom God chose, and whom God delivered from bondage and cared for in the wilderness, should now thoughtlessly inflict the bondage of injustice on the most vulnerable. And yet God's voice, however hard to hear, keeps the relationship alive, and makes audible both a renewed call to the practice of justice, and a promise of restoration even in the face of ruin.

When we hear the call of the prophet Amos to let justice flow, or to roll powerfully down, or to well up like water, it has a particular resonance for this year's World Development Appeal, which has a particular focus on access to water for basic needs as a visible embodiment of justice. And yet it also reminds us that although it is the poor who suffer most visibly when justice is not done (2.6-7), the justice which we are called to let flow with the power of rushing water has the upsetting force of grace at the heart of its life-giving power for us all.

And so we are called to seek justice for the poor, partnering this year with the **Kigezi Diocese Water and Sanitation Programme** in Uganda, and with **Life With Dignity** in Cambodia. And we are reminded that partnerships such as these give real, material shape to justice, making justice as real and tangible and refreshing as water.

But we are also reminded that when justice flows, it wells up with strength and transforming power not only in the lives of the poor, but also in the lives of the not-poor, which is most of us. The prophetic word of God announces that God's justice will transform the lives of the rich as profoundly as it will give dignity to the lives of the poor. And when righteousness rolls down like an ever-flowing stream, we too will be in its path.

And perhaps in the lives of those of us who generally take for granted the availability of clean water and good sanitation facilities, the rushing waters of justice will nourish one of the core practices of a life lived in Christ: a trust in God which enables us to live simply and with gratitude, thirsting not after the luxury goods of Amos' compatriots but after a restored and dignified life for our most vulnerable neighbours, and drinking deeply of the waters of the Spirit, who gives to each one of us, each day, our breath, our daily bread, and the water of life.

So let us place ourselves together in the path of God's justice, and generously support this year's World Development Appeal. But let us also allow our own lives to be transformed, that trusting more deeply in God's abundance for all, we may live more simple and more joyful and more dignified lives, for Christ's sake.