

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Morning Service on Sunday 12th July 2015
by Revd Alan Haine**

Theme: Standing Up for Justice

using two of the day's Lectionary Readings, Amos 7: 7 to 15 and Mark 6: 14 to 29

1865, the year that this Church was built, may have been the year that the composer Sibelius was born who wrote the tune of our last hymn, but it was also the year in which Abraham Lincoln, that great American President and champion of liberty was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth.

Maybe some of you have seen the Oscar-winning film "Lincoln" in which Daniel Day-Lewis gave a memorable portrayal of the President. And, of course, the reason for Lincoln's assassination was the way that he championed the cause of the slaves in the United States and stood up for the cause of freedom and justice, leading the Union forces from the north of the United States against the Confederacy from the south where there was such opposition to the idea of ending the evil of slavery.

Looking through my notes, I realise that the last time I was in this pulpit, for your Church Anniversary 3 years ago, I mentioned Abraham Lincoln at the evening service. I explained then that in my Church in London, where the congregation is largely from an Afro-Caribbean background, we do not have a midnight Communion on Christmas Eve, but instead we still have a midnight service on New Year's Eve, keeping up the old Methodist custom going back to John Wesley of the Watchnight. I mentioned that before I went to my present appointment I had never even attended a Watchnight Service, let alone led one. But through the internet I discovered that the reason the people in my present Church are so enthusiastic about the Watchnight is that, apart from the tradition going back to Wesley, there is also a link to the United States and to Abraham Lincoln.

Apparently, as long as slavery was legal in America, slaves could be sold onto another owner and then they would have to leave behind their husband or wife and any children they might have. The sales of slaves usually came into effect on January 1st, so December 31st became the day when slaves might be forced to bid farewell forever to their nearest and dearest. When Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery in the States in the 1860's, he was careful to make the act come into force on January 1st, so that from then on instead of Watchnight on 31st December being a time of sadness and farewell, it became a time of celebration and rejoicing at the anniversary of the end of the tyranny and cruelty of slavery.

Whilst now Lincoln is celebrated as the one who brought about the emancipation of the slaves in his country, at the time it was a very risky thing to advocate because of the strength of opposition in the southern states just as in America 100 years later Martin Luther King also encountered great opposition and eventual assassination because of his advocacy of full civil rights for black people.

So often in history those who have held political power have not been willing to support policies that are just and fair and which allow their citizens to live fully and freely. In our Old Testament Lesson, the prophet Amos was standing up for justice against Jeroboam, the king of Israel and Amaziah, the priest of the temple in Bethel. The whole of Amos' prophecy is in fact one long cry for justice.

Amos was prophesying in about 750 B.C. For some while since the death of King Solomon there had been 2 Jewish kingdoms: the smaller one called Judah (ruled over by Solomon's descendants and centring on the city of Jerusalem and the temple there) and the larger kingdom called Israel (ruled over by other kings with its capital at the city of Samaria and a new temple at Bethel).

Amos came from the smaller kingdom of Judah. As he said near the end of our reading, he had not been brought up to prophesy for a living and had not been born into a family of prophets, but was by trade a shepherd and grower of sycamore-fig trees. The message he brought was not one that he was paid to bring and the task of prophecy was not one that he was doing to earn his living. Instead he had come to prophesy solely because God had called him and charged him to proclaim judgement against Israel, including King Jeroboam and the priest Amaziah.

Maybe in contrast Amaziah was doing his work as a priest primarily because he liked the money and position it brought, but that was certainly not the reason why Amos had come to Bethel to give his message. He had not come because it would be financially profitable for him or in any way easy for him to deliver such an unpopular message. Amos knew when he came to Bethel that, like Abraham Lincoln all those centuries later, he was taking a massive risk. He might well be imprisoned or even put to death for speaking out against the king, but he still felt he had to do that. For Amos was adamant that King Jeroboam, Amaziah and all the leaders of Israel were acting against the justice of God. That is why he spoke of God holding a plumb-line against the people of Israel. Just as a builder checks that the house that has been erected is standing straight and true by using a plumb-line, so God was looking at his people Israel and their leaders to see if they were acting in a way that was straight and true and in accordance with His justice. Sadly, when God looked on His people in this way, He found them wanting. Not only did they worship idols in the temple that had been built in Bethel instead of going to Jerusalem to worship the true God, but also their lives denied the reality of God's justice as they took advantage of the poor and sold them into slavery. And so Amos, despite the risk to his own safety and freedom, felt he had to speak out. When the priest Amaziah confronted him and told him in no uncertain terms to go away back to his own land of Judah, Amos was not afraid to reply in the way that he did and assert clearly and bravely that he was acting not on his own initiative, but at the call of God and that God would bring judgement on the people for their sin and injustice.

The Gospel reading about John the Baptist has a very similar message. John the Baptist was in many ways the last of the Old Testament prophets. Like them (and especially like Amos) he was not afraid to speak out against injustice and wrong and so he had dared to challenge the conduct of King Herod himself. This, of course, was

not the same King Herod who reigned over the whole of Palestine when Jesus was born, but his son, Herod Antipas.

The drunken party Herod was having which led to John's execution is a reflection of his moral laxity and the fact that for him enjoying himself was the main purpose in life, whilst following justice and truth had little value. But John had the temerity to attack Herod Antipas for marrying Herodias who had been his brother Philip's wife. According to Mark's gospel Herodias was more upset about this than Herod, but in the end, when Herod had made his drunken promise to Herodias' daughter, he realised that he had to have John murdered, even though he would rather not have done that.

Quite clearly for Herod Antipas the proper process of law and justice was of no account: if someone posed a threat to him or those closest to him, he would just get rid of them, whatever the law said. But the way Mark introduces the account of John's death suggests that even Herod may have had John's death on his conscience, so that when Jesus came along Herod's guilt made him suspect that Jesus was not just any old prophet, but actually John risen from the dead and come back to haunt him. Maybe even Herod knew deep down that he had acted unjustly in the way he had treated John and was now having to face up to that.

Now when you heard the Gospel reading today, you may have thought that it was not the most cheerful of passages. Perhaps you thought I should have chosen something more positive and less gory to preach about. In my defence I would say that the passage is today's chosen Gospel reading in the lectionary and I don't think in the 10 years I was minister here I ever preached on it.

Sometimes recently the television news bulletins have been so depressing that I must be honest and say that once or twice I have turned over to another channel. But as Christians we can't bury our heads in the sand and keep running away from reality. The story of the Baptist's death is not a pretty one, but sadly it reminds us how all too often those with power have used it to suit themselves, even if that has meant causing pain or, at worst, death for another human being.

This incident is also in one respect unique in the whole of Mark's Gospel. That Gospel is made up of lots of little units called "pericopae". You can impress your friends with that word now. But seriously, some of the pericopae are about Jesus' miracles, some include His teaching or the stories He told and others are about His life and eventually His death and resurrection. But apart from this one we heard this morning, every single unit in Mark's Gospel is about Jesus or features Jesus. Only this one has no mention of him at all, apart from saying at the start that Herod thought Jesus was John resurrected.

Yet surely one of the reasons Mark included this gruesome story in his Gospel was because it foreshadows what was to happen to Jesus. Just as John suffered and died through injustice and the breaking of God's laws, so Jesus Himself was also to face a similar fate at the hands of some of the Jewish leaders and the Roman governor

Pontius Pilate. Those Jewish leaders held Jesus' trial by night which was contrary to Jewish law and they also relied on false witness rather than true accusations. Pilate himself was quite well aware that Jesus was being brought to him because the Jewish leaders felt threatened by him, but instead of throwing out the case, as he could have done, he preferred not to upset the Jewish leaders or risk losing his own position and so he simply allowed Jesus to be executed. Thus it came about that in the end Jesus, like John the Baptist, like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, and like so many others in the course of history suffered and died through injustice and the intentional transgression of God's laws.

And what is the meaning of all this for us today as we try to live Christian lives in 2015? Obviously that when we are faced with injustice and wrong, we do not turn over to another TV channel or simply try to forget about it and seek to enjoy ourselves like Herod Antipas. No, we must be like the plumb-line of which Amos spoke and be ready to stand up for what is true and right and just, even if that means risking unpopularity or even worse.

As far as we know Amos did not suffer as a result of his stand against King Jeroboam and the priest Amaziah. There is no record of him being put in prison or executed for his stand. But, as we have seen, others who have stood up for justice have not escaped so lightly and not only John the Baptist but our Lord Jesus Himself suffered and died at least in part because they would not stay silent in the face of injustice. I think it is highly unlikely that any of us here this morning will suffer death because we take a stand in this way. But we must be ready to speak out and make that stand and, if we do that, we may well find, that we will not be able to go on sitting comfortably: that we will become unpopular or, at the very least, that it will cost us time and effort.

I am constantly receiving e-mails asking me to support petitions that are basically about justice: e.g. a person being denied the best health treatment because it will cost the N.H.S. too much or a poorer country being threatened with greater poverty or deprivation because of the actions of a larger more powerful country. It doesn't take much to click on the button on the computer and sign those petitions, but I know deep down that I should be doing more than that. Not in every case perhaps, that would be impossible, but at least for a cause that I know to be right and that touches my conscience. If every one of us here this morning were willing to do all that we could to support the cause of justice in at least one area, what a difference it would make to our world. That might mean spending money, but it won't just be about money, it will be about using our time and talents to help a cause that we know to be just.

150 years ago when this Church was built many Methodists and members of the other Free Churches were known for what was called their "Nonconformist conscience": the fact that they would speak out against the things they believed to be wrong and unjust such as the abuse of alcohol, the evils that came from gambling, or the plight of the orphans and needy and all those who were being exploited. In many ways we need to get back to that, not so that we can be kill-joys

or say with little Jack Horner what good boys and girls we are, but so that we can help to eliminate injustice and wrong. The great Christians have always done that and been willing to take risks in the process.

So far all the examples I have quoted have been male, so let me remind you of two women who have battled against injustice. There was Elizabeth Fry, the Quaker, who now appears on the back of our five pound notes, but who worked so tirelessly to improve the appalling state of the prisons in the early 19th century and to better the lot of female prisoners. Another great Christian woman was Henrietta Barnett who lived from 1851 to 1936 and was married to a Church of England priest who worked amongst the poor in the East End of London. She shared in that work and sought to make sure that the poor were treated with greater justice and charity, eventually helping to found the Hampstead Garden Suburb, a part of London very near one of the churches in my present Circuit and a community in which the aim was that all classes would live together in harmony.

So throughout history men and women of God have stood up for justice and truth even when that has been hard. I'm sure that in the 150 years of this Church there have been many ordinary Christians here who have sought to do that too, standing up for those who could not stand up for themselves and generally following the way of truth and righteousness, however uncomfortable that might sometimes have been for them. Their example as well as those we have thought about this morning encourages us to follow in the footsteps of John the Baptist and of Jesus Himself and be those who constantly struggle to see right prevail.

Our next hymn was written by that great German Christian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who in the years just before the Second World War and during it himself stood out against Hitler and the evils of Nazism, eventually being hung by some vindictive Nazis only a few weeks before Germany surrendered in 1945. I remember when I was here one Good Friday focusing on his example and using another of the hymns he left behind. This one was written for the New Year of 1945, just a few months before he followed the way of John the Baptist and Jesus and underwent execution. It speaks of the acceptance of suffering with the awareness that Jesus has gone that way of suffering before us and that He is present with us in both our joys and sorrows. As we continue our witness and as this Church continues its life into an uncertain future, may we each seek to be those who, like Bonhoeffer, are faithful to Christ in every situation, not least in the way that like Our Lord we champion the cause of truth and right.