

302 A thing of nought

In Britain the last political party conference has just finished. This year across these party conferences there has been anxiety over the Brexit negotiations, with the expectation of rocky times ahead for the country in the short term, followed by the promise of a bright and prosperous future for us all thereafter. We shall have to wait and see, and meanwhile we continue to pray for God's sovereign hand over the wheeling-and-dealing, that there may be a sensible outcome for all concerned.

We would do well to learn some lessons for our current national situation by turning in our Bibles to the book of the prophet Amos. Amos was a classic "ordinary bloke", working quietly as a shepherd around Tekoa, a village in the hill country of Judea 10 miles south of Jerusalem (1.1). But the Lord had other plans for him, and appointed him to serve as one of His prophets mainly in Samaria, the capital of Israel, the northern kingdom of the ten tribes that had broken away from Judah. This split had occurred in c.980 BC in the reign of Rehoboam of Judah, by God's direction (I Kings 11.28-40), as punishment for the appalling idolatries introduced by King Solomon at the promptings of his many wives who "turned away his heart" (I Kings 11.3-9ff). To begin with, all was set fair for this new break-away northern kingdom under Jeroboam I, if only the king would hearken to the Lord's commands, walk in His ways, and do what was right in God's sight, keeping God's statutes and commandments (11.37-38, KJV).

The years passed, and by the time of Jeroboam II two hundred years later in c.760 BC life in Israel was prosperous, comfortable - and deeply idolatrous. One great fear, akin to our current Brexit concerns though far more threatening, had been over a possible invasion of Israel by Syria, but that threat had now gone. So at first glance the king and people of Israel "had never had it so good", to coin Harold Macmillan's phrase regarding the Britain of 1957. But God saw otherwise, and sent his shepherd-prophet Amos into the situation.

On the one hand Amos spoke blunt God-given warnings, addressed first to Syria, the Philistines, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab and Judah (1.3 – 2.5), before concentrating on the main target of Israel (2.6ff & 7.15). A few examples of what was going on in Israel must suffice here – you "turn aside the way of the meek" (2.7); your "houses of hewn stone" (5.11); "I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins" (5.12); "I hate, I despise your feast days" (5.21); and those "that put away the evil day ... (that) lie on beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches ... but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph" (from 6.3-6).

Israel's idolatrous complacency is neatly summed up thus - "Ye which rejoice in a thing of nought" (Amos 6.13a), words which remind us of Jesus' own teaching about that fine-looking house which turned out to be built only on the sand (Matthew 7.26-27). Sure enough in 720 BC the built-on-sand, idolatrous house of Israel did fall to the Assyrians, and "great was the fall of it" (Amos 5.2 / II Kings 18.9-12 / Matthew 7.27).

Yet on the other hand, through Amos God also repeatedly called His people back to Himself in patience and mercy (egs., 4.6,11; 5.4,6,14), and promised that ultimately, after their deserved punishment under divine judgement, "Behold the days come,

saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt” (Amos 9.13). What a promise of real, deep, true, lasting blessing! - and one which, with the Jews now restored as a nation in their own land since 1948, as repeatedly prophesied, must surely be getting near to its glorious fulfilment (eg., Zechariah Chapters 12–14 / Matthew 24.29-31 / Romans 11.25 / ...).

As we sometimes come across in these Reflections, the simple path of divine blessing for a nation, including Brexit-facing Britain with her Protestant constitution, remains clearly set forth in God’s Word: namely a steady resolve, by those divinely entrusted with religious and political authority, to steer the nation in accordance with God’s Word, in terms of public discourse, legislation and personal example (eg., I Peter 3.13-17 & Romans 13.1-8, divine principles for both the leaders and the led).

Unfortunately we see very little of such leadership in the political sphere in our country at present, as the recent party conferences have so clearly shown. Our prayerful, practical Christian input into the corridors of power is thus needed today as much as ever, that our nation may shun “rejoicing in a thing of nought” – that ever-elusive dream of a God-defying, politically-wrought, earthly paradise - and return to the old paths laid out so clearly for us in God’s Word.

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