Matins Third Sunday of Epiphany

The Archdeacon of Oxford

‘More people are exploited and abused in the cause of religion than in any other way. Sex, money and power all take a back seat to religion as a source of evil. Religion is the most dangerous energy source known to mankind.’

So says, Eugene Peterson, not a tub thumping atheist but a widely respected priest, pastor and teacher. He comes from America. Perhaps he has seen more of the misuse and abuse of religion than I have. His words are striking. ‘Religion is the most dangerous energy source known to mankind.’

It comes from his short introduction to the book of Amos in the bible, within his widely used bible translation called ‘The Message.’ If you don’t have a copy and want to read the bible in a new way, I’d recommend it to you. He is a writer who cuts to the quick, and his bible translation does that also, getting to the heart of a passage and its meaning today. Its worth buying just for his introductions to each book of the bible alone. Short but enlightening.

His preface goes on,

‘The moment a person, or government, or religion, or organisation is convinced that God is either ordering or sanctioning a cause or project, anything goes.’

We’ve seen lots of President Trump in recent days. I’ll not go there today! But George W Bush said when he was President that he felt ordered by God to make war on Iraq, and look what has followed.

Peterson goes on,

‘The history, worldwide, of religion-fuelled hate and oppression is staggering. The biblical prophets are in the front line of those doing something about it. The biblical prophets continue to be the most powerful and effective voices ever heard for keeping religion honest, humble and compassionate. Prophets see through hypocrisy, especially hypocrisy that assumes a religious pose. Prophets are not impressed by position or power or authority. They aren’t taken in by numbers, size or appearance of success.’

We heard a bible passage today from the Prophet Amos. Peterson says of him,

‘Among the prophets Amos towers as a defender of the downtrodden poor and accuser of the powerful rich who use God’s name to legitimize their sin.’

Amos was no prophet by birth, nor a prophet’s son. He was a herdsman, a shepherd. He didn’t want to speak out, but felt he had to. As we heard today,

‘The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who will not prophesy?’
God as a lion. Its an image picked up by the writer CS Lewis in his Narnia series. Aslan the Lion, the King of Narnia. ‘Not tame but wild’. The young girl Lucy asks Mr Beaver, ‘But is he safe?’

“Safe?” said Mr Beaver. Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

And this Lion roars. This King has a Voice.

Psalm 29 speaks of the voice of the Lord being ‘over the waters’ like the creative spirit of God at creation, the beautiful voice. Not the brute voice of a bully, or the shrill voice of a castigator….. but ‘Powerful and full of majesty, the divine voice that commands with a power all of its own.

Lewis describes this in The Magician’s Nephew,

“A voice had begun to sing. It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. It was hardly a tune. But it was beyond comparison, the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.”

In the clamour of our world, how do we listen for that voice today?

The First Letter of John suggests a way to listen for the Word or Logos of Life, as he calls it, echoing the Prologue to the fourth gospel that also bears his name.

For John the Word of Life echoes through all creation. It is beyond all things yet within all things. It is the divine spark that brings light and life ….. the Logos that was revealed once and for all time in the person of Jesus Christ.

‘We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have touched with our hands concerning the Word of Life,’ as 1 John begins in the passage we heard this morning.

‘This life was revealed, (in Jesus Christ, but also in his Body the church) and we have seen it and testify to it’, John says, ‘and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.’ Eternal life as defined in John’s gospel is for the here and now as well as the life beyond. Above all else it is relationship with God. ‘This is eternal life’ John 17v3, ‘That they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.’ Knowing God not only with the mind, but with heart and soul and life and strength. This is the Koinonia spoken of in 1 John 3. Translated ‘Fellowship’ but meaning so much more than that. It means as individuals and as Christians together
being taken into the triune life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Very suitable for Christian Unity week!

We experience this in prayer and in worship but also find and live out this Koinonia in the everyday relationships, decisions, words and actions that make up our lives. For, as John goes on to say in the most famous part of this letter,

‘Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;’ This is the prophet voice coming out in John. Aspiration and action need to connect. Love of God means nothing unless we also love this world and the people within it. Those close at hand and those far away. Patient and loving even to ourselves, whom we either enthrone or despise but need only to bring before God in penitence and faith.

For ‘Whoever loves is born of God and knows God.’ John goes on. ‘Whoever does not love does not love God, for God is love.’ Love and God belong together. You cannot have one without the other.

That’s how we listen for the Word, the Logos of life. The lion’s voice... heard most clearly in patient, kind loving action. Love given and love received. The Word of life seen not just 2000 years ago but touched day by day in the Koinonia, the faithful lives of God’s people here on earth.