

Prophetic

Act on Poverty

Ask Ahead: a question to consider before this session

Who would you consider to be a modern day prophet?

Scripture Reading: Amos 5.11, 21-24

Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

...

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them,
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.



88% of UK adults think more should be done to tackle poverty.

Source: Yougov poll for Christians Against Poverty, March 2023

3.8 million people in the UK experienced destitution in 2022.

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

More than 1 billion people in the majority world live in poverty.

Source: Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023.

Reflection: What is a prophet? How do we find our prophetic voice?

What is a prophet? What do you imagine when you hear that word?

You might see a prophet as someone exceptional, someone particularly gifted with the capacity to speak out, guided by God in a special way. Paul suggests that speaking prophetically can be a distinctive calling (Ephesians 4.11-12). We see this in a number of individual figures in the Bible, across history, and perhaps around us today.

Yet alongside this distinctive calling, there is a wider sense in scripture that we are all called to speak with a “prophetic voice” at times. In this session, we invite you to explore how finding and nurturing your prophetic voice, individually and as a church, can be an important way to respond to poverty.

Let's start by hearing from an Old Testament prophet who was very concerned about poverty. **Read the passage from Amos above and take a moment to reflect on what stands out to you.**

Amos insists that the existence of richer and poorer groups is not something that happens by accident. Instead it comes about through the **deliberate exploitation of those in poverty**. People in poverty are kept in a situation of deprivation by having to pay 'levies of grain'. This might refer to unfair levels of taxation, to bribery, fraud and corruption in the official systems, or even to a form of indentured servitude where people are burdened with debts that they can never realistically repay. We continue to see practices like this today, for example in cases of modern slavery.

When considering who is responsible for this situation, **Amos identifies those who have failed to 'establish justice in the gate' (5.15)**. The gate in Amos' time was the place where official business went on; where decisions were made by those with power and significant transactions were carried out. The prophet criticises those who use wealth and power to "game the system". The powerful, he says, are making cheating a routine part of how they live and govern. They 'practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals' (8.5-6)

'we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt ... No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. quoting Amos in his 'I Have a Dream' speech (1963)

For Amos the structural division between rich and poor goes against what God intends for creation. **To continue to support this unjust society violates the way the world should be and the good that human beings were made for**. To try to live by injustice is as absurd and unnatural as trying to 'plough the sea with oxen' (Amos 6.12).

In other words, the division between the wealthy and those living in poverty is no good for anyone. This is why this passage talks about the houses of those who are wealthy being un-lived in and the wine from their vineyards remaining untasted. These verses suggest a time of judgment yet to come. The unjust will not profit indefinitely.

But Amos also expresses the idea that it is impossible to ever get true enjoyment from things gained through the oppression of others. This is because participating in oppression damages our relationship with God, the ultimate source of all joy and delight.

The passage goes on to express God's rejection of the worship offered by those who fail to engage with issues of justice and oppression.

What does Amos suggest to us today about how we may speak with a prophetic voice?

Here are some possibilities. You may have your own ideas to add to these.

- Amos is sharply **insightful** - he identifies what he thinks is wrong and spells this out clearly.
- To arrive at this insight, we must assume that this prophet has been paying attention. He is **deeply engaged in his context**. He knows what is going on. Perhaps he hangs around at the gate watching and listening, speaking to people who have been cheated. Perhaps he seeks out those who have lived experience of suffering under this system and listens to their stories.

- Amos **speaks truth to power**. He addresses directly those who have power and advocates for change. He is aware that this carries risks. He knows he is likely to face push back from the powerful who hate 'the one who speaks the truth' (5.10). Speaking prophetically can make people uncomfortable.

'The early Christians were accused of turning the world upside down. If we viewed the world through the lens of [Amos] then we would want to do likewise.'
(Rev. Dr David Isiorho)

Following Amos' example, then, we might want to think about:

- what we can do to more deeply attend to injustice and inequality in our own contexts.
- how to identify where things have gone wrong in the structures and systems that surround us.
- what we feel equipped to speak up about and how we can empower ourselves and others, developing our ability to speak truth to power.

To give you some examples of what this might look like in practice let's listen together to the voices of an activist in the UK with lived experience of poverty, and an activist in Malawi helping churches speak up for justice.



Listen In: Ashleigh May, Mums on a Mission

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/actonpoverty>
 (8 mins)

Hear from Ashleigh May, one of the founders of Mums on a Mission, a not-for-profit organisation that supports and empowers families to break free from the cycle of generational poverty.

Ashleigh shares her own experience of poverty, homelessness, mental ill-health and developing her voice as a community organiser.

**What do you think when you hear Ashleigh's story of her experience?
 Have you had the experience of your life taking an unexpected direction following a call from God?**



Listen In: Bryer Mlowoka, Evangelical Association of Malawi

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/actonpoverty>
 (6 mins)

The Evangelical Association of Malawi is an umbrella group for more than 110 church denominations and Christian organisations in Malawi. Hear from Bryer Mlowoka, Head of Programmes, about how faith is at the root of EAM's development and advocacy work.

Bryer quotes from another prophetic book, Micah, and says that 'where there is injustice, the church needs to speak.' What do you think about this? What do you think the church is called to do about issues like poverty? Do you think the church today is answering that call?

Get Inspired: Margaret's Story



Watch our short film (5 minutes) here: <https://youtu.be/lgzZRNINZYU>

Meet Margaret Robinson, a long-time supporter of Christian Aid, living in North Devon, UK. Margaret is the first to acknowledge that she is not a natural orator. Nonetheless, she felt she had to respond to God's call to speak up for justice. Hear about how Margaret got involved in campaigning in her local area.

Act on Poverty - What could you and your church do?



Ashleigh, Bryer, and Margaret are all using their skills and passions to seek change in their communities. They also believe we can speak out and influence those who have power, locally and globally.

Action 1: Follow up on the examples you have discussed of modern prophetic voices. Seek out and listen to one of these voices this week.

Every MP is there to represent their constituents in parliament. You can call, visit or write to your MP anytime. Most hold 'surgeries' one day a week, where you can go and meet them. MPs are duty bound to reply to you and to raise your concerns in parliament. Margaret's efforts with Selaine Saxby led to a debate in parliament with cross-party support.

Action 2: Do you know who your MP is? Has anyone in your church ever met with or written to their MP or to another policymaker, locally or nationally? Could they share what they spoke about and what they felt it achieved?

Closing Prayer

God of justice and righteousness, who spoke through the prophet Amos,
Help us to speak truth to power.
Help us to attend to and understand inequality in our community.
Lift up the voices of those excluded from power and give us ears to hear them.
Challenge us to become prophetic speakers in your name and to empower others to do so.
Inspire us with your Spirit that we may work together for a more just world.
In Jesus name, Amen.

