

Harmless Religion: Loss of Soul

From the series: The Human Face of God

Text: Amos 5:21, 24; 7:13; John 11:48

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Lenten focus on the human face of God is a focus that intends for us to concentrate on the life of Jesus. Because of what has been done archeologically and in cross-cultural studies of peasant societies of the Roman Mediterranean basin, we know more about the historical circumstances and the social context of the life of Jesus than any generation since that time. The more we learn about the circumstances which Jesus addressed, the more it becomes evident that Jesus dealt in a very concrete way with the contemporary issues of his day and that the kingdom of God of which he spoke was a very down-to-earth kingdom, having to do with social relationships and economic matters and political concerns, that Jesus was in the tradition of the great Hebrew prophets, that Jesus addressed the power structures of his day, structures of religion and politics, and that, in that confrontation with established authority, he was publically executed because he was deemed to be a dangerous, prophetic figure.

The fact that I concentrate on the life of Jesus in the Lenten season or anytime, you have to know, is a surprise to me, and I do it with a guilty conscience, because I was raised on the conventional wisdom that religion and politics don't mix. I do it with a guilty conscience because it was drilled into me that you don't drag politics into the pulpit. I do it with a bit of foreboding because I hear those voices of my past that say, "Don't read the newspaper to me; tell me about God." That's the way it was said. I believed it. And so, when I deal as I deal in the season of Lent with the life of Jesus, and when I am forced to conclude that he died the way he died because he lived the way he lived, then I am doing about a 180-degree turn from where I came into this business, and one doesn't do that without having the old tapes continue to play. I am telling you things that in an earlier time in my ministry I would have written off as the social gospel of the late 19th century and early 20th century, the social gospel against which I was warned as the gospel of the old liberalism that saw Jesus as a model and an example. I present to you today, according to the best understanding I have, Jesus' dying a martyr's death which, at one time, I would have scorned. He wasn't a martyr; he was, rather, the Lamb of God destined before the foundations of the world to die for the sin of the world. The music we have just heard sung by the choir is lovely,

but the theology is poor, and that's where I was. To come to where I have come is quite a radical adjustment. But the adjustment is necessary if I would be honest with you and would be honest to God, because I believe with all my being that Jesus is a heroic, magnificent figure who was filled with the Spirit of God, who was the embodiment of God in human flesh, who incarnated that which was truest of the depths of the heart of God. Being that, he faced what was wrong with this world and, in the name of the God of justice, the God of Israel and on behalf of the people, he confronted the established powers in the hopes that there might be transformation.

Jesus, as John before him and Paul after him, I believe, expected that God would intervene very soon, and would right what was wrong. But, in the meantime, he called his people to live as what they were - the children of God, with dignity and honor, even in their oppressed state, and he confronted the powers of religion and politics in the name of the people, in the name of God calling for justice.

The adjustment that I have made is an adjustment that I can illustrate to you by pointing you to the most familiar of Christian creeds, the Apostles' Creed. You remember it? "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried..."

Do you note anything? Do you realize, in the light of what I have been saying, that we jumped from his birth to his death? "Born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate." The whole of the life of Jesus lies in that comma. The Church in its creedal tradition and in most of the centuries of its existence has made of Jesus a cultic salvation figure and has failed to face the truth of his life. The most familiar creed of the church dumps it all into one comma, without a word.

I do believe that Jesus was in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, the tradition of the writing prophets of the 8th century, those great Hebrew prophets, the first of whom was Amos. Date him around 750-760 B.C.E. in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Jeroboam is king. The country has prospered and expanded; it is affluent and all is well. But there is no compassion for the poor, there is no justice in the structures of society, and Amos is that prophet in the name of God who confronts the establishment with the conditions of the people of God that betray what God is all about. Amos was the first example of that which was true of Israel and made it unique.

Do you remember Israel is born on the Exodus; they are brought into the Promised Land; they live for a period of time under the Judges. When there is a crisis, the Spirit of God falls on someone, a Samson or a Gideon, and they rise up and lead the people of God through the crisis and to peace, and then they go back and farm again. God is the king. Israel, in that situation, has a theocracy. But, then the greatest Judge of them all, Samuel, is the minister of the day and the people say, "We're tired of being this way. We want to be like other nations. We

want a king." Samuel says, "If you get a king, the king will tax you, he will take your sons and daughters, there will be conscripted labor. Think twice before you do it." They say, "We want a king." Saul is anointed, followed by David, followed by Solomon, and, with the rise of the monarchy in Israel, there arose the prophetic voice.

The unique thing about Israel, and I suspect the thing that has kept Israel alive through all these millennia, is the fact that established power was always addressed by a prophet in the name of God. Religion and politics could never get away with it in Israel without hearing the word of the Lord.

Amos was the first of the writing prophets who confronted that Northern Kingdom in the time of its prosperity and its social disregard and said, "You are going to die." I don't think Amos knew in terms of some predicted prophesy what was going to happen in the next few decades, but, as a matter of fact, in 722 the Assyrian empire came in and removed the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom, and we still speak today of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. They were removed from their land, never to return. Amos said to them it is because there is no justice in the land. He said, "You have religion a-plenty. But, I despise your feasts; I can't stand your music. Your religion stinks." Well, he didn't quite say that. He said, "Your religion is an offense in the nostrils of God."

Amos was tough. Amos was passionate, and Amos confronted the royal court, only to have the royal high priest come out and confront him. So, in the 7th chapter we have that encounter between Amaziah the priest and Amos the prophet, and Amaziah appeals to the king and says, "This man is saying things that cannot be tolerated. This language is unacceptable in the royal court. This is the royal temple; go back to Judah and earn your bread there."

Amos said, "Look, I'm not a prophet getting paid for this thing, a professional religionist. I'm no prophet; I'm no prophet's son, but when I was following the flock, the word of God came to me and said, 'You go prophesy to my people Israel. Now, therefore, hear the word of the Lord.'" That was old Amos.

We have some familiar phrases from Amos. "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion. Prepare to meet your God." And the text of the morning, "Let justice flow down as mighty waters and righteousness as a mighty stream. Enough of your religious feasts and festivals and all of your liturgical finery. Give me justice. Don't think you can worship me and at the same time be living in a situation of injustice and oppression."

So, the priest says to Amos, "Go away." But, as always happens, royal power co-opts religion and, even though the monarchy grew and over against it the prophetic voice, the monarchy knew it couldn't make it without the religious blessing, and so it cultivated the priesthood that would offer it sacrifices, would pray at its presidential inaugurations, would bless the beans at the PTA, the kind of harmless religion that is ceremonial, that functions in order to give a gloss to

everything and not allow any examination of what is really going on in a society. That kind of religion is paid for by the royal court, and Amaziah was happy to be in the service of the king. But, Amos said, "Hear the word of the Lord," and thus we have the classic confrontation between the prophet and the priest, between religion and politics.

In the gospel story that we read a moment ago, Jesus had performed the miracle of the raising of Lazarus and, contrary to Matthew, Mark and Luke, who make the cleansing of the temple the catalytic event, for John it is the raising of Lazarus which causes the people to stand in awe and believe, so they call a council meeting and ask, "What in the world are we going to do? If this goes on, the whole world will follow him and then the Romans will come in and destroy our holy place and our nation." Caiphus, sophisticated, suave, wily, a man about town with a lot of experience, says, "You don't know anything at all. It's better that this one man die than that the nation perish." (And John, being High Priest that year, spoke as a prophet, pointing to Jesus' death as the means of bringing in all the scattered children of God.)

But, where would you have been? What side of the table if you had been at that Sanhedrin meeting? I mean, it's not such a simple matter; these were not bad people. In the situation in which Jesus emerged, Roman imperial power held the trump card, but the Sadducee and priestly families were the authority that was the buffer between Rome and the people. They were the ones that could keep the natives quiet and, as far as Rome was concerned, Rome knew how to rule. They had the priestly establishment that would keep the natives quiet while they exploited the countryside. Wonderful. If you were a Sadducee in authority, you were a high priestly person and playing ball with Rome, you would get along pretty well in Jerusalem.

Yet, their fears were not unfounded. What they feared actually happened four decades later, because some fanatical, hysterical prophet came to town and aroused the populace and there was some kind of demonstration that brought in, finally, the Roman legions that decimated the town and leveled the temple. And these were responsible people.

What would you have done, for example, if you had sat on the Board of Elders at that Jerusalem Council meeting? Where would you have been? Might you have said, "Look, what he's saying is in the tradition of our greatest prophets." Would you have argued on Jesus' behalf that he was reaching back into that old covenant history? Would you have been supportive of him and say, "He's non-violent. He's appealing to the people, to their dignity, to their sense of being the children of God. He's in the line of the prophets. What he is talking about is what we ought to be concerned about as those who are in authority for this people." Is that how you would have argued?

Or, would you have said, "Caiphas, the old fox. That's it. I don't like to do it. I think essentially the guy himself is rather harmless, but he's got to go."

It's not such an easy thing. If you bear responsibility for the well-being of society or church, government, community, if that's your responsibility, then you do have to be careful about any traveling salesman that comes to town who would cause a disruption, that would be bad for the body politic. It's not so easy.

But, you see, practicality and expediency demanded that Jesus be publically executed. Why? Because he was a danger to civil life and public order. Because he dared confront the religious, political authority with the devastating condition of the people of his day, and just like Amos in the name of the God of justice, Jesus stood for all of that which reflected the intention of God.

The beat goes on. This kind of thing doesn't stop. There is a video about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer which I saw a year or two ago, a video which had footage I had never seen before, the leaders of the German evangelical church giving the Heil Hitler salute, embracing Hitler, affirming Hitler and Hitler them. That's a familiar story to us, but it's rather shocking again when you actually see it happen. And to the credit of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Pastor Neimueller and others, they formed the Confessing Church that came out of the evangelical church and, of course, Dietrich Bonhoeffer died. He gave his life because that's what happens to people who confront religious, political co-optation.

We've just gone through again the anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King. The assassin, James Earl Ray, has died, but finally through the King family's own pursuits we know now that, what we've suspected all along, there was government complicity, because we don't publically execute people today. We get them assassinated. We have our own way of doing it, and Martin Luther King was a disruptive prophet.

It was in the Civil Rights of the 60s which King was leading which was the beginning of my own coming to consciousness of the fact that the church had to be about more than the salvation of souls. I didn't march; I wasn't that awake. But I should have. It was about that time, as well, that Martin Luther King began to speak out on the Vietnam War. There were many protestors, particularly the young. And there were some voices in the church. The church was beginning to see that the very real world needs to be addressed, in the name of God, in the name of Jesus Christ. Martin Luther King was slain, assassinated.

I remember in the wake of the sixties where I was starting to come awake, and having gone to Europe, came back here in 1971 and a few of us went out to the Institute for Successful Church Leadership in Garden Grove, California. April of 1971. Part of that Institute was a conversation with Bob Schuler in his office, and there were some seminarians there and there was a young professor of New Testament that didn't have enough to know that you don't needle the host. So, now this is 1971, in the wake of all of this "stuff," and he was pushing Bob Schuler because Bob had made some statements about "No controversy in the pulpit." That was something that was a hallmark of Bob Schuler's ministry. He got a little

agitated and he condemned those preachers who got out of their pulpits and took up picket signs and walked the streets. I had a little bit of concern for the young professor, and I intervened and said to Bob, "Well, what about Jesus?" He said, after a long pause, "I'm only 44; I don't have all the answers." Word for word quote.

It's not easy to make decisions, draw lines, know when to speak, where to speak, when to stand up. It's not easy to know how to balance social serenity with public protest. But, I have to tell you, Jesus died because of the way he lived, because he embodied and incarnated the justice of which Amos spoke.

Don't you suspect that I would rather come here week after week and be your priest rather than, from time to time, being a prophetic voice? Don't you think it would be more comfortable for me to inspire, encourage, comfort? Don't you think that Jesus as a salvation figure is harmless in terms of any contemporary issue that you are facing in your business or political life? Isn't the fact that the church is swept along with this worship as entertainment which is so noisy and blaring - isn't that because it's reflecting the culture that is noisy and blaring? You can't even go to a ball game without the action stopping and the organ starting. You turn on the TV and the commercials blast you out of the room. You go to a movie, and the previews knock you out of the seat. The culture is noisy; there's no time to be silent and to think, to ponder. Music, worship as entertainment. It's harmless. Or, worship, religion as therapeutic, helping you to be well-adjusted so that survive the pressures and tensions that you face in the world or the community life, giving you wisdom by which to be well-adjusted, well-attuned, to get by without ruffling feathers and causing trouble.

Don't you think it would easier for me to peddle here week after week harmless religion, to use Dom Crossan's phrase, Religion as Prozac? There's a lot of it around. It's a lot easier to be a priest, and it's easy for me to be a priest because I love you and I love to pray with you and I love to be there with you and feel your pain and share your darkness. That's very natural for me. It's very natural for all of the people on this team.

But, sometimes it's also liberating and freeing to gain one's own soul and to be honest to God.