

**Sermon: 2019/12/03 (The Feast of John of Damascus, Year A) -
Amos 3:12-4:5; 11:1-10; Psalm 13; Romans 15:4-13; & Matthew
21:23-31 (KJV) - BTR**

We continue our theme from Sunday, answering the question as to how we
"prepare" for Christ's 'com[ing] again in glory to judge the living and the dead'.
[Pause.]

The Psalm we heard sung (at the beginning of this service), and then said (aloud)
ourselves - Psalm 13 - is described, I found, as '[a]n anguished prayer asking God
[for His help]' [n.1] - for His help in the face of crushing defeat and the looming
prospect of death.

And the choice of Psalm 13 and this description is sooo(!) perfect for two reasons:
Firstly, because this is the Feast Day of John of Damascus, [n.2] who lived in
seventh century Syria, when the Christian-majority countries of the Middle East
had been, just a "handful" years before he was born [675 AD], suddenly
subjugated by the armies of Islam from Arabia [640 AD].

And, secondly, given our other Old Testament text this evening, from (the Book of)
Amos, who describes (for us) in brief but *lurid* detail the post-invasion destruction
left behind by the attack of the Assyrian Empire, who had just eliminated, with *very*
little effort, the northern kingdom of Israel.

Notice how, using a single, uncomfortably *vivid* metaphor, the prophet "paints" us
a picture of what was left; of what remained afterward in that land:

Remember, like the Babylonians later, who imitated the Assyrians, and indeed are
sometimes called the *Neo-Assyrian Kingdom*, the Assyrians' policy to subjugate a
conquered people was to remove the majority from their homes, and, to break
their will; to demoralise them, transported them far away to start over in distant
lands on some other frontier.

And this they had done to *half* the "Holy Land" with their characteristic efficiency.
Amos, therefore, is aware of Jews remaining *only*, now, in (just) *one* region:
in Samaria, (which was spared the deportations only because it was mountainous
and somewhat inaccessible.)

This modest, wretched remnant in that poor place he likens to what a shepherd
might find in the mouth of a lion after it had killed prey:

that is to say, mere scraps of flesh hanging from its teeth - its gruesome, right?
'[T]wo legs, or a piece of an ear', we're told.

Imagine that scene.

The butchery; the (red) carnage.

This is all that is left of a majority of the former Twelve Tribes of Hebrews.

Even the scared sacrificial, cultic site at Bethel - the northern kingdom's (controversial) *alternative* to the Jerusalem-Temple - had seen violence from these *blasphemous* invaders, who, as they robbed the shrine, 'cut' the altar's 'horns' off.^[n.3]

Now, if you're curious as to what these were, exactly, they were carved ornamentations that rose (up and out), in a curve, from the (four) corners of the altar, which was a heavy stone table, and they looked much like how they are called: *the horns* on the face of a bull.^[Fig. 1]

And, likely having that very image in mind - of a horned bull, Amos turns (in our text) to explain *why* it is that this calamity had happened: it happened because the people of the northern kingdom had grown *fat* like 'cows' - fat like 'ye cattle of Bashan', grazing and consuming *all* the time - like 'cattle' do and little besides. Grazing and consuming all the time *and* thus *not* sharing with those in need. This was, proclaims Amos, their principal crime. The one for which God ordained their destruction as an independent nation.

And this is *such* a pertinent lesson for us at this time of year; which is *the* (definitive) season, is it not, for feasting, parties and self-indulgence? We must beware, therefore, that we don't become like the Israelites - those 'cattle of Bashan' whose slavishness to their appetites blinded them to the needs of the less fortunate: the poor, who Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, called blessed. I pray, then, that Amos' words and the fate of Israel might galvanise us to be different, *remarkable*, and inspire us to make this an especially charitable Advent.

Footnotes:

1. See: <https://hymnary.org/hymn/PsH/13>

2. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_of_Damascus

3. Coincidentally, see: <https://www.breakingisraelnews.com/139258/horn-of-the-stone-altar-discovered-at-shiloh/>

Fig. 1

