

# *setting the plumb line*

a sermon preached on the

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Amos 7:7-14, Eph 1:1-14, Mark 6:14-29

Amos presents us with an image I had forgotten about – a plumb line, set by God into the midst of Israel. We know about plumb lines; their job is to be straight up and down, they tell us if what we build is properly vertical, they set a standard for what is good. To a Christian reader it is immediately clear that Amos' plumb line is Christ, the moral standard bearer against which we, our communities and institutions can be judged.

Herod also knew about plumb lines. He and his murderous family had been getting rid of them for several generations. In Mark's account of the beheading of John the Baptist, Herod outrageously ignores the standard of the plumb line, the standard of behaviour set not only by Christ, and John his victim, but even by the Roman occupation as well. In the face of his own misgivings, he has John executed on the demand of his illegal wife a demand channelled through his daughter. Herod is guilty at once of child-abuse, and abuse of royal power.

While Herod was not completely secure in his position, tyrants never are, he had constructed an environment of privilege, of fear and the threat of summary violence. It was instrumental in enabling him to flout any of the community standards that might have been in existence.

Twenty centuries on we take comfort that such barbarism is well a thing of the past. While the spectre of ISIS and its practice of beheading are distressing in the extreme the real threat here is negligible. But are we free from abuse of power? It seems to me that in the past few federal governments we have seen increasing willingness to run against the standards, to skew to the plumb line, in terms of how democratic power is exercised. This is not to critique any one government; all the alternatives seem to have the same willingness.

For example: We all know that the lobbyist industry is alive and well in Canberra. This has been the case for many, many years and the way in which influence is traded has been written about frequently and continues to be a source of concern in the media and in political circles. Its outcome is that sectional interests achieve greater influence on government decision-making than they are democratically entitled to, against your and my interests.

The acceptance of whatever inducements are offered by lobbyists and the decision-making responses by government officials is an abuse of power. Not only by secular standards of democratic fairness, but also according to the Gospel. I am thinking of the Magnificat, Luke 1:51.

Another example is the turning back of refugee boats headed for Australia. Once perhaps more or less covert, it is now an open policy boasted by the government

in power, supported by the alternative and an openly funded action. This contravenes the humanitarian principles of many people in this nation. It contravenes our obligations under the UN Refugee Convention to which Australia is a signatory and it certainly contravenes the principle of hospitality to strangers in the Gospel.

More recently we have the issue of the plan to legislate for the removal of citizenship of certain categories of dual nationals accused of terrorism. To do so requires the amendment of the Australian Citizenship Act of 2007. Early drafts of the amendment legislation vested the power of determining the guilt of the suspect in the minister. Constitutionally, this power belongs to the judiciary, not the executive. Such a change would potentially compromise the separation of powers usually held to be sacrosanct. It appears that the policy makers have listened to legal reaction and have redrafted the amendment, which we must acknowledge. However, that any government would attempt such a change should concern us.

What are we called to do in the face of abuse of power? Someone has to hold up the plumb line. Someone has to call out that there is a standard and call to account those who ignore it.

Who holds the plumb line? The Church does. We are in possession of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to whom Amos points in his prophesy, the plumb line set in the midst of Israel.

Do we point to Jesus? Are we prophetic? The late David Bosch, who was a South African theologian and wrote the now standard text on missiology, proposed that the church lost its prophetic way at the time of Constantine, when it became an institution and ceased being a movement. Does our church look more like an institution or a movement? We know the answer don't we?

We need to rediscover that lost prophetic voice; we need to be prophetic like Amos. We know however that it is hard to do. As in Herod's court, to call the king to account is a risky business. You might lose your head!

The safer path is to align oneself with the holders of power. Over the centuries of Christendom the church has trodden a careful path not to give official offence. Sometimes scandalously, as when some parts of the church in Germany during the Second World War were complicit by their silence in the Holocaust of the Jews for example. In a completely different way, the Church of England remains the established national church and so is less free to be prophetic than it might otherwise be.

At the personal level it is both hard to see what difference we can make and also a difficult social and personal commitment to stand at the barricades in protest. But if we are honest we know these rationalisations are excuses rather than reasons, and allow us to retire into middle class comfort not needing to have to upset the furniture.

But there are some who are not prepared to sit by quietly. The Grandmothers Against Detention of Refugee Children are one example that defy social convention because of a commitment to standards. The church's future depends on such as these to hold up the plumb line to tyrannical power, to act in the place of Christ as we are all called to do.

If we cannot bring ourselves radicalism we can at least look within our community to see who are prepared to make church-saving, community-saving social change and to support them as much as we can. We must allow them to be brave and innovative even when we cannot. We can all lend a little support. What we cannot do is to prefer our own comfort or deny resources or get in their way.