

There were many prophets in Israel and Judah in the time of the monarchy but only a few had their sayings written down and their writings preserved. Why were Isaiah, and Jeremiah and Ezekiel kept and hallowed; Amos and Hosea valued even though they were southerners preaching in the north? Why was Micah esteemed and others forgotten?

It was not because they were universally acclaimed as speaking the word of the Lord. Most, if not all, faced opposition and some persecution. They were not popular and had powerful enemies, but it was their words that became part of sacred Scripture, venerated as God's word.

The reason, in part at least, seems to have been that their words were proved to be right. Time was the judge and time declared them to be true prophets. Few prophets had a happy message; many spoke truth to power and gained the inevitable reward of trial and punishment. But it did not stop them speaking out, forthrightly and incessantly.

When the truth they had spoken was recognised, their followers, repeated the oracles and preserved them, believing that truth has an eternal value. What was God's word on one occasion would remain God's words and continue to inspire and motivate in the way of God for all time. That is what we mean when we talk about Scripture being inspired. When we speak it we speak not only with our own breath but the breath of God is in that speaking.

There is a sort of parallel in the way some literature becomes 'classic', and continues to be read and venerated long after the author has passed on. So young people still read Enid Blyton, and delight in the adventures of the Secret Seven, before moving up to the more grown up exploits of the Famous Five and (my favourites) The "Adventure" Series. I would have thought the very dated in a world of '*FaceBook*', '*U-Tube*' and '*Twitter*', but they continue to excite. Other others of my youth, whom I would have thought would be read forever are largely forgotten. Who reads John Buchan today? Who has heard of Denis Wheatley, a massive best-seller of former times. Fashions change and names are forgotten but the Word of God as spoken by some prophets last forever.

Look again at the passage from the prophet Amos, our first reading, and you need make few adjustments to hear it as a condemnation of the injustices and malpractice and money grasping that is almost acceptable in the commerce of today.

Amos did not want to be a prophet. He was a man of modest means, employed as an

orchard keeper, tending sycamore trees, which were a different species to those that we call by that name, and a shepherd in Judah. Then he was summoned by God to go to the northern kingdom, which was vastly more affluent than its southern neighbour, and the rich had succumbed to the way of the rich, accumulating money and ostentatious signs of wealth beyond what they might ever need.

In this society people thought of everything as in limited supply. If someone had more then others had less. What we now call 'a zero sum game'. So those who hoarded riches deprived others and kept the poor poor. Then in addition, they cheated them as well.

Does not this sound contemporary? How much money do bankers and MD's of FT-100 listed companies need? How excessive can bonuses go?

Jesus attacks those who put their trust in money 'that tainted thing'. Jesus is a prophet in the line of Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah, but he is the 'eschatological prophet', that is, the prophet of the end time. Henceforth there can be no further prophecy for Jesus, the Son of God, is God's definitive Word. After Jesus there can be only explanation and clarification. Jesus takes up the prophets' call for justice and an end to oppression but he takes that call even further. Challenging the rich, often in the most direct terms, while affirming the downtrodden by spending time with them, eating with them and healing their afflictions.

Jesus may never have possessed a coin. When questioned about whether taxes should be paid to Caesar he asked to be shown a coin. He accepted charity but he was not a wealth producer and so would have been seen as an economic burden on society, a sponger, rather than one who added to the nation's Gross Domestic Product. However, in his poverty he saved the world.

There is little security in this world, as the dishonest steward found out, when his little world of deceit collapsed. He was nimble footed and made quick adjustments, albeit dishonest ones, to survive a little longer. It is his quick wits that Jesus praises not his morality. We need to be as alert and ingenious as he is but with a better moral perspective. We need to listen to the prophets, and be less concerned with making one.