

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 22, 2019

“A community which seeks to live primarily on its past will petrify, but a community which loses contact with its past or comes to repudiate much of its past is likely to disintegrate.”
*(James Hitchcock, **Recovery of the Sacred**, p. 89)*

The Old Testament reading from the prophet Amos offers insight into the culture of the children of Israel. The northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah had fractured around 930 BC. Amos was probably born around 780 BC in the southern kingdom of Judah. His birth coincided with a time of great peace and prosperity. The empires of Egypt and Assyria were both in a period of decline allowing for smaller kingdoms, like Israel and Judah, to flourish. Amos, an ordinary man (Amos 7:14), was called by God to go to the northern kingdom of Israel. The leaders of Israel believed its prosperity was due to God being pleased with the magnificent worship He was given through the shrines of Bethel and Gilgal. Amos' message is to remind them that their ostentatious liturgies and extravagant festivals mean nothing to God. They do not influence Him in any way because they have become a camouflage hiding the true intentions of wealthy and powerful individuals. It is these individuals, whom Amos echoes in our reading for today, who cannot wait for the “obligatory” religious service to end so they can return to living the life they want; even if it is a life which seeks to exploit their fellow countrymen. They have lost their connection to their own past as wanderers and sojourners. The unimaginable would occur in 721 BC as a renewed Assyrian empire finally laid waste to Israel thus ending the reign of the northern kingdom.

The message of Amos could be summed up with these words: “Religion influences society”. The way we worship either as an individual or a community can strengthen or weaken the moral beliefs we, the members of the society, possess. If our worship is both true and humble, we have means to become a more authentic image of Jesus to all we daily encounter. If, however, our worship has become a means to soothe ourselves, then could we still be challenged to become more Christ-like and could we still influence our society to become more Christ-like?

I have found myself struggling with these two points most recently. I believe these concerns have arisen due to my recent studies concerning our liturgy. Allow me to open my thoughts to you with one question: “In our quest to make worship of God ‘relevant’, have we unknowingly allowed worship to instead become ‘irrelevant’?” This may seem an odd statement, but consider the rise of “Prosperity Preachers” in our culture. Consider the modern worship structures we are building, both the exteriors and the interiors. Reflect upon how various long-standing Christian denominations have now renamed themselves using nondescript, non-offensive terms. Examine the music we now listen to in our churches, both the instruments and the words of the hymns. Does the way we worship still influence our society or has our society altered the way we worship? What do you think?