

## Epiphany 2 2021 (17<sup>th</sup> January)

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	I Samuel 3 vv 1-21 p274 Revelation 5 vv 1-14 p1237
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	John 1 vv 43-51 p1064

**ALMIGHTY** and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth; Mercifully hear the supplications of thy people, and grant us thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Amen*

*And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision.*

At the time of our Old Testament lesson, the Ark of the Covenant – symbol of God’s dwelling with the people - was kept in the shrine at Shiloh. The shrine was presided over by a godly, elderly priest by the name of Eli. He had, however, lost control over his two grown up sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who abused their position and brought disgrace on the holy place. They took the best of the people’s sacrifices for themselves. There is the implication that the service of the sanctuary had degenerated into drunkenness and disorder. In the language of the KJV, *they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation*. Hophni and Phinehas not only sinned against the people of Israel; they sinned against God. *The word of the Lord was precious in those days*, not in the sense that it was highly valued, but because it was scarce. *There was no open vision*. As priests, Hophni and Phinehas were responsible for the covenant between God and His people. *You will be my people; I will be your God. You shall be holy because I am holy*. The priesthood was responsible for teaching God’s Law, both by word and example. The sons of Eli ought to have been pastors to the flock of God. It was the role of the priest to intercede with God on behalf both of the nation and of individuals and to bring them God’s Word in any given situation. And of course to preside over the sacrificial system in order to ensure that everything was done in accordance with what God revealed to Moses on Mt Sinai when He first brought the Children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. In these duties, Hophni and Phinehas had failed very badly, with the result that *the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision*.

I wonder what life was like in the wider community in those days? Amos prophesied several centuries after the lifetime of Eli and Hophni and Phinehas. God gave him this message for the Israelites of his own day (8<sup>11&12</sup>): <sup>11</sup> *Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord:* <sup>12</sup> *And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it*. Why would there be a famine of hearing the Word of the LORD? If you read the Book of the Prophet Amos, you will see why. The people disregarded God. They cheated in business. They oppressed the needy. The rich dwelt in luxury, while the poor were swindled out of what they were entitled to. Do you see any parallels between England today and the Israelites to whom Amos was sent? This is what Amos says earlier in the same chapter: <sup>4</sup> *Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail,* <sup>5</sup> *Saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit?* <sup>6</sup> *That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat?* They can’t wait for the religious festivals to be over so that they can re-open their businesses and exploit their customers, the rich growing richer, while the poor grow poorer.

I’ll leave it to you to decide how applicable Amos’ words are to the way we live now. But, going back to Hophni and Phinehas, what I’m thinking is that there was probably a kind of vicious circle at work. Quite probably, Israelite society in Eli’s days was not too different from what it would be several hundred years later in the time of Amos. It is natural for human nature, twisted as it is by original sin, to disregard God and His commandments and therefore for human beings to look after number one at the expense of everybody else. Ancient Israel is very far from the only human culture in history in which the rich prosper at the expense of the poor and injustice is enforced by violence. In fact, ancient Israel was a great deal better than most human cultures. They had the Law and the Prophets even though they often didn’t heed them, just as Christian countries have the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. We very often fail to heed that Word

but we do have that Word and I think we can honestly say that we have not done as badly as those nations of the world which do not have a Christian heritage. We do have a great deal to be ashamed of both in our national and in our personal lives. The Word teaches us what sort of people we ought to be. The Word is a word of warning. The Word both judges us and invites us to return to God. The Word is a word of consolation and of mercy. The Word is a word of comfort and encouragement. Are we, however, open to the Word of God?

The vicious circle which I'm thinking probably existed in Eli's time is one in which poor leadership results in an ungodly nation and an ungodly nation begets the poor leaders it deserves. So chaotic governance invites lawlessness to take root in a country and a people which loses its respect for the rule of law also loses its ability to establish a government worthy of respect. In the last few weeks, the United States has come closer to the brink than any of its friends would desire.

*And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision.* I don't know about you, but I do know that there are a lot of things which perplex me about the way our world, our country, is going. It's not just COVID, though I would like to hear a word from the Lord about what COVID means, what we should do about it and what lessons God wants us to learn from it. There are so many issues regarding which we thought we knew what was right and now the apparent certainties of centuries are being challenged and turned upside down. It is astonishing, when you come to think about it, that we are hardly even allowed nowadays to question practices which well within living memory were illegal. I have recently been reading *Living in Faith and Love – Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage*. We are all being encouraged by the bishops to engage with this process of reconsidering the Church's centuries old teaching on these matters. The book is very well worthwhile reading and it is worth engaging with the material provided. It's available online. I can tell you where if you like. It is sensitive, thought-provoking and challenging. And it also feels as if it cuts the ground from under the feet of a traditional believer like me. <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith>

Similarly, we find ourselves being challenged with regard to our country's history. The Brexit debate has been so bitter because it has really been about a question of identity. About half of UK citizens see themselves as Europeans who share a common history and culture with the rest of Europe and consider it inconceivable that we should not be part of the grand European Project and the other half of us define ourselves as quite definitely not European with our own distinctive national identity and our own particular relationship with the rest of the world, especially with those parts of it which speak English and/or were formerly part of our Empire. Empire too, and British history in general, has come up for re-examination. We older people were mostly brought up to be proud of our country's history. More recently, the emphasis has been on things we ought to be ashamed of. Of course, there is truth in both. We did lead in the abolition of the slave trade, but, before that, we were one of the worst of the slave trading nations. We did build the Indian railway system, but we also put down what we called the Indian Mutinee with unforgivable barbarity. There is a great deal to be said, but often you feel you just can't say things or question what other people are saying because, in the culture wars, you just get shouted down or cancelled if your questions are deemed unacceptable or inappropriate. And that is in itself another issue. We were taught to value free speech. Now we are taught that it is more important not to give offence than to speak what we believe to be the truth.

*And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision.* What is the Lord saying to us today? What is the Word the Lord has for us? Is it like in the days of Hophni and Phinehas and the time of Amos when there was no word from the Lord because the people just weren't listening? The people and their leaders were far too rapped up in themselves to be attentive to what God might be saying to them. God said He wouldn't speak His Word to a people who so thoroughly rejected what He had to say to them. Is that why it is so hard for us to hear a word from the Lord today? If we sincerely desire to hear the Word of the Lord what we need to do is to repent of our sins, our every failure to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. Amos did have a positive word for us (5<sup>14</sup>): *Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, shall be with you, as ye have spoken.*