**TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**

**First Reading Amos 8:4-7**

Amos is the earliest of the Old Testament prophets whose words have been preserved for us in writing. The opening line of the book (Amos 1:1) tells us that Amos was a peasant of Tekoa (about six miles south of Bethlehem) and that he was active during the reign of the Kings Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel. Since his ministry was clearly set in the height of Israel's prosperity, it must have been well into the reign of Jeroboam II around the year 750 B.C.

He was a shepherd who also managed an orchard of fruit trees and was a lay-preacher. When Amaziah, priest of Bethel, warned Amos that he should earn his living by accepting fees like the professional prophets (see I Samuel 9-8; 1 Kings 14:3; 2 Kings 8;8), Amos replied that he was not a NABI (prophet) of that sort. Amos had received a personal call.

Amos was the great champion of justice who vindicated the moral order established by God and enshrined in the covenant. He castigated the materialism that prevailed in an era of hectic prosperity. To his eyes, the symptoms of social decay were glaring. Wealth, concentrated in the hands of a few, and these the leaders of the people, had corrupted its possessors; oppression of the poor was rife; the richly-endowed national religion, with its elaborate ritual, provided a comfortable, self-righteous atmosphere. It was this dangerous complacency that the prophet set out to shatter.

Amos did not speak in riddles; his message was uncompromising and unmistakable. He savagely assailed the oppression of the poor and the cheating of the poor, as well as the corrupt judicial system which denied them any hope of obtaining justice (2:6-8; 3:9-11; 5:7, 10-12, etc.).

Our short reading is an eloquent example. With biting sarcasm he depicts the 'religious' employers waiting impatiently for the end of holy days so that they can engage in lucrative business. Those sabbaths and holy days - what a shameful waste of valuable time!

Though law forbade Israelite merchants to make use of a dishonest measure (Leviticus 19:36; Deuteronomy 25:14-15) they are here represented as tampering with the ephah (dry measure) and shekel (unit of weight) - and selling 'the refuse of the wheat.' By such sharp practice it is the vulnerable poor and needy who are being bought and sold. Amos was the Oscar Romero of his day.

**Second Reading Paul’s First letter to Timothy 2:1-8**

The passage gives Paul’s guidance for the ‘Prayer of the Faithful’ The Christian community is to pray for those in power and authority. These would have been pagans, and Paul says that it is the Christian wish that they should share in the salvation God wills for all peoples. If God’s saving grace reached Israel first, then it embraced the Gentiles next and will subsequently spread out to all humankind.

Clearest of all is the declaration in v. 4: ***'God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth***.' That this should be is logical. It is the inevitable expression of God's loving concern for humankind. Salvation is offered to all and is offered to all as gift. Whether some, ultimately, are not saved we do not know. What we should be clear about is that there is one way, and one way only, in which anyone can be 'lost.' It is the way of rejection of God's loving gift. God is love and his purpose is love. Can any child of his, finally and definitively, turn his or her back on infinite love?

God alone knows. Let us take comfort in the assurance: God wills the salvation of all, for there is only one God, and one mediator, Jesus Christ who gave himself as a ransom for all.

**Gospel Luke 16:1-13**

The short form of to-day’s Gospel reading omits one of the most interesting of Jesus’ parables. It is clearly from Jesus, simply because the Church twisted themselves in knots trying to derive teaching from it.

The story of The Astute Manager (16:1-8) was one which Jesus' readers would have readily understood. They would have appreciated the humour of his bold characterization: his putting forward of a fraudulent man as a spur to resolute decision and action. The manager was accused of embezzlement. Until he produced his books he had a breathing space. He rewrote contracts - in favour of his master's creditors and in view of a kickback! It was a neat scam.

The master (who had to honour the contracts duly made in his name) grudgingly applauded the resourceful conduct of his unscrupulous manager. Jesus would wish that his disciples show as much resourcefulness in God's business as men of the world do in their own affairs. In later generations, the story quickly raised the problem of how this devious man could held up as an example.

So at the end we have several ‘conclusions’ to derive respectable lessons from a disreputable story. The steward is no longer an example but becomes a warning. It is important to note that these additions leave the substance of the parable unchanged, but they do bear witness to an interpretation which is now applied to members of the second generation Church. It is, however, an application that is very much in the line of the parable as Jesus spoke it.

The resolute action which he recommends does embrace the generosity of v. 9, the faithfulness of vv. 10-11 and the rejection of mammon in v. 13. The early Christians did not miss the point of the parable; but, in applying it to themselves, they necessarily caused a shift of emphasis. They were able to bring its teaching to bear on their daily lives because they lived in the atmosphere of the decision it urgently enjoined: they had accepted the Kingdom. They were to be as shrewd with Christianity as those outside were with paganism.

The parable of The Astute Manager says positively what the parable of The Rich Fool (12:13-21) says negatively. The steward is, at least, prudent: his example teaches people to use their earthly goods for the sake of a heavenly future. Just as the 'Woes' (6:24-26) are addressed to the rich, the episode of 'the rich ruler' illustrates the extreme difficulty a rich person faces in finding salvation (18:18-27).

And even if the rich hear the word, 'they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature' (8:14). Their 'hearts are weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness, and the worries of this life ' (21:34). They become incapable of looking beyond this present life. This is Luke’s conviction. He sounds as if he was addressing a Christian community where many were prosperous as Amos had done in his day.

Even though the sayings of 16:9-13 are complementary to the parable of The Astute Manager, it is not unfair to say that the ultimate message of the parable, as Luke understands it, is given in v. 13— 'No servant can be the slave of two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot be the slave both of God and money. (The word is Mammon which is a personification of a worldly attitude).'

Yet, it is not really a struggle between God and Mammon. The conflict is situated in the human heart, in the psychological inability of giving oneself wholly to two masters, neither of whom can be served by half-measures. The service of the one or of the other must be exclusive. One has to make a choice.