

“The Plumb-line.”

If we learn anything from our readings from Amos and Mark’s gospel, it’s that speaking truth to power can be a difficult task; and sometimes it can be a downright dangerous task.

By way of example — or, perhaps, simply presented as cautionary tales — in two of our readings this morning, we heard about the prophet Amos speaking truth to King Jeroboam in our first reading, and we hear about the aftermath of John the Baptist speaking truth to King Herod in our gospel. In the first case, truth-telling got Amos kicked out of the country. In the second, truth-telling cost John his head.

But, be that as it may, I didn’t want my sermon to focus on “the cost of discipleship” that Amos and John had to bear; it’s a topic that merits our attention, but I’ll leave that for another day. Instead, I wanted to focus on the plumb-line that Amos, in his vision, sees God holding up next to a wall. Because the plumb-line — whether it’s being employed literally or figuratively — is useful as a tool for the people of God.

For example, in construction, a plumb-line is still used by brick and stone masons to ensure that the walls they’re building are truly straight and perpendicular to the ground.

But in the case of a prophet like Amos — or in the case of people like you and me — the plumb-line is a good device for determining whether or not the course of action we are choosing is in line with the expectations and values of God. And in this case, everyone has a plumb-line.

For a number of years — and especially in the evangelical Christian community — when people were trying to decide which course of action to take, it was popular for them to ask the question “What would Jesus do?” That’s a plumb-line.

When our girls were young, and Peggy and I found ourselves intervening in some conflict or disagreement, where one of our daughters was acting ... let’s just describe it as “un-Christian” ... towards the other, part of the reprimand would almost always include our asking the offender “How would you feel if someone did

that to you?” And we wouldn’t just ask the question; we’d stand there and give them as much time as they needed to reflect upon what they had done, and come up with an honest answer.

But if we were fortunate enough to stumble upon a situation where things were just starting to heat up — where tempers were still relatively in control, and blows hadn’t yet been exchanged — our advice to both girls would invariably be “Treat your sister the same way you would like to be treated.”

In other words, what we were trying to do, was to instil within each of our girls a plumb-line; something which would always be there even if we weren’t, and which could always be a standard to help them choose the better course.

We all have plumb-lines, and we all follow them to greater or lesser degrees. Sometimes it’s the memory of good advice given by our parents, or teachers, or trusted friends. But just as often, it’s that feeling you have in your gut, or that small voice you hear in the back of your mind. And even if you can’t put your finger on where it came from, or how it came into your awareness, it’s there, telling you “Do this, and not that. Go here, and not there.” And, by and large, our plumb-lines serve us well.

Now, I mention all this because having a plumb-line is part of how God created each of us. We get a sense of that in the opening verses of our reading from *The Letter to the Ephesians*, where St. Paul writes: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”

In other words, choosing the right *path* and not the wrong, and doing the right *thing* and not the wrong, is something that is intrinsic to our nature, because we are people created in the image and likeness of God.

In the book he co-wrote with his daughter, entitled *Made for Goodness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu made the following observation:

“We know all too well the cruelties, hurts, and hatreds that poison life on our planet. But my daughter and I have come together to write this book because we know that the catalogue of injuries that we can and do inflict on one another is not the whole story of humanity, not by a long

measure ... We are indeed made for something more. We are made for goodness.

“We are fundamentally good. When you come to think of it, that’s who we are at our core. Why else do we get so outraged by wrong? When we hear of any egregious act, we are appalled. Isn’t that an incredible assertion about us? Evil and wrong are aberrations. If wrong was the norm, it wouldn’t be news. Our newscasts wouldn’t lead with the latest acts of murder or mayhem, because they would be ordinary. But murder and mayhem are not the norm. The norm is goodness.”

Let’s think back for a moment about Kings Jeroboam and Herod. The reason we probably even know about them was because, in the end, they both turned out to be a couple of pretty bad guys, who made a lot of bad decisions for a lot of bad reasons. But if Archbishop Tutu is correct — and I tend to think he is — then Jeroboam and Herod started their lives pretty much the same way you and I did: as good people, with good hearts, and good intentions. But somehow, and for reasons we don’t really know — though we could speculate — they ignored their plumb-lines, they turned their backs on who they’d been created to be, and they followed a different path.

Today, one of the most important things we can do, as the children of God, is to be true to our nature; to be true to who and what we’ve been called to be. And part of doing that is — when we see someone choosing the wrong path rather than the right, or doing the wrong thing rather than the right — is to find the courage to be truth-tellers. Sometimes it may mean speaking truth to power. But always, it means speaking the truth in love.

Because, in the end, wherever we witness acts of kindness and justice, wherever we see people interacting with gentleness and respect, there we will find people whose lives — as St. Paul also described in our reading — are lived “for the praise of [God’s] glory.” But perhaps more importantly, there we will find God.

Amen.