

**“In God We Trust”**

In the name of the One Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, dear brothers and sisters in the Lord: I'm going to begin this morning with a something of a confession. It's a dark secret of my younger years that shames me now to speak of; but the truth is that I used to be an avid fan of the television show *Star Trek*. Yes, it's embarrassing but true. Now don't get me wrong here, I was never a full-fledged “trekkie”. I never went to any of those weird Sci-Fi conventions dressed up like Mr. Spock, what with the pointy ears and all (although I do think it would be neat to learn how to do that thing when he'd put his hand on someone's shoulder, give a little squeeze, and knock them out). But even though I wasn't that much of a fanatic, I can say that I've probably watched every episode at least three times (maybe more). And somehow, I suspect that I'm not alone in this. C'mon, come clean: who else was a closet Trek fan?

In retrospect, it's interesting now to watch some of those old shows and see how they reflect the fears, politics, and issues of the times in which they were created. Take the old series, for example: it was filmed in the mid to late sixties during the height of the Cold War. So on one side you had the good guys: an alliance of friendly alien races called the United Federation of Planets – which sounds a lot like the good old USA. The biggest villains out there in space were the Klingons: a race of warriors who were bent on conquest and destruction. They were a threat to everything the freedom loving peoples of the Federation stood for – and they were therefore a very thinly veiled portrait of the Communist Soviet Union. Even farther out there in space was another group of villains just as threatening, but they were much more secretive and mysterious. They kept themselves distant, avoiding direct contact or negotiation – almost as if they were behind an immense galactic wall. They were called the Romulans, which might suggest some connection to Rome; but they were clearly intended to represent the Red Chinese – they even looked a little Chinese. (And now some of the Trek fans are thinking, “You know, I never thought of it that way; but now that you mention it ...”)

Okay then jump ahead to follow up series which was called *Star Trek: the Next Generation*. It was filmed in the late eighties and early nineties, after the Cold War was over. And suddenly, sure enough, the formerly evil empire of Klingons had become friends of the Federation. So new villains were needed to replace them, villains that reflected the social thoughts and issues of the day. One group in particular stands out. They were the Ferengi: ugly little brutes with bald, bulbous heads; shifty, beady, little eyes; and clutching, claw-like hands. Their teeth were a crooked, jumbled mass of yellow points – the kind of thing that orthodontists wondering how they're going to put their kids through college fanaticize about. And they had these huge ears which were capable of picking up even the softest of whispers. These ears served them well because they were a race of ruthless merchants and interstellar traders. They were constantly in search of new commerce opportunities, always listening for rumors of potential wealth to be made. They didn't care who they dealt with or what kind of merchandise was involved. There were no ethics involved in their decision making. They were driven by just one thing: if there was a chance to turn a profit, they wanted to be in on the deal. And the more profit to be made the better. In short, they were absolutely disgusting both inside and out – and they were intended to be so. But the question is: who were they supposed to represent? Who in this whole wide world could possibly be pictured in such an uncomplimentary way? Well, in case you haven't figured it out, the sad truth is that they were meant to be a mirror of ourselves: we ugly Americans and our perpetual, pitiless pursuit of wealth and the comforts that our wealth buys. And while the faults of the Ferengi were highly exaggerated to press the point, there's enough truth in the picture to hit home.

No? You don't think so? Well, let's look at just a few of the ugly facts: We get up each morning expecting to enjoy a nice aromatic cup of steaming hot coffee, never once bothering to think of the desperately poor families who picked and processed the coffee beans, and how they are subsisting on the brink of starvation and living in squalor, the virtual debt slaves of big coffee corporations who, rather than present us the unsightly truth about the wretched status their employees, give us images of the smiling, happy Juan Valdez and his faithful burro who are only too eager to serve you. Ditto for sugar, chocolate, and a few other imported “necessities” we take for granted. And each day we put on clothes that are both well-made and remarkably inexpensive without pausing to consider that the reason many of them are so affordable is that

they're made in unsafe, dimly-lit sweat shops in China and Southeast Asia by women working long, hard hours for mere pennies. And then at day's end we come home to enjoy a fine inexpensive meal, maybe of chicken or turkey, without ever thinking of the poor guy who works at least sixty hours a week at his filthy job in a slaughter house, slinging a knife gutting birds at less than minimum wage and with no benefits – because he's an illegal alien and his employers know they can get away with it. Instead we complain about our porous southern border, and how thousands of illegals seeking a better life for themselves cross it each week. It never occurs to us to think that how without all those illegal migrant laborers sneaking about our country trying to avoid expulsion and doing all the jobs that no self-respecting American would do, the produce departments of our grocery stores would be almost empty, and most of what was there would be too costly to buy. And just one more that may hit even closer to home: here in the great state of Iowa we rejoice that America's insatiable thirst for cheap fuel to run our cars and enormous SUVs has resulted in the decision to process corn into ethanol. It means increased prosperity for everyone in the Corn Belt – but that prosperity has been purchased at the expense of poor folks living in Mexico and Central America for whom the price of tortillas – which is their daily bread – has now nearly doubled. And for hundreds of thousands who could barely afford to eat before, it means untold suffering and misery. But hey, that's their problem, right?

Now, please don't misunderstand me: I know very well that the political and economic issues involved in these sorts of things are vastly complex and that there are no easy solutions to the problems. Nor do I imagine even for a moment that anyone will be better off if tomorrow you decide not to have that cup of coffee, or buy that imported sweater, or eat a chicken dinner. But what I am saying is this: we sit quite comfortably at or near the very top of the pyramid of world-wide economics. And as we do, we are very distant—it's almost as if we're completely insulated from that vast mass of humanity that's holding up and being crushed at the bottom of the pyramid. And let me suggest that we want to keep it that way. We want to maintain the status quo. It's pretty sweet for us up here at the top. And so we want to keep those at the bottom out of sight and out of mind so that we can pursue our plans to enrich ourselves and enjoy our lives without the need to either feel guilty about the inequity of it all or to feel compassion for those who are being oppressed.

And in that way we are not very different or any better than the people that the prophet Amos is denouncing in this morning's Old Testament lesson who “trample the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end.” Amos was sent by the Lord to the northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. It was a time of great material prosperity for the people there – well, at least it was for some of them. The economy as a whole was booming; but the fact is that some people always know how to take better advantage of a booming economy than do others. And they did. They got richer than their neighbors. And once the balance was tilted in their favor, they used the power of their superior wealth and their control of the markets to tilt things even farther into their favor – to the point of engaging in unfair and illegal business practices. For example, they “made the ephah small”. An ephah was a volume measure for grain; we'd say a bushel. So what it means is that when selling wheat to people, they used a basket that was smaller than standard. It also says they “made the shekel great”. A shekel was a weight measure for silver. So it means that when weighing the silver coins a buyer used to pay for his wheat, they'd use a dishonest set of scales that made the coins appear to be lighter than they actually were. So the buyer ended up paying more and getting less. He might have complained that it wasn't fair; but then what choice did he have? For him it was buy the grain or starve. The rich seller would have called it “maximizing profits”; but through Amos, the Lord called it what it was: robbery and extortion.

Ah, but it gets worse. Our text also says that they sold the chaff of the wheat. A better translation would say that they “sold the *refuse with* the wheat”. The idea is that they deliberately did a lousy job at the winnowing floor where the wheat and chaff were supposedly separated. No quality control. So, the grain they sold in the markets was full of dirt and straw and all the other inedible garbage that was supposed to be removed. And of course, people ended up having to pay for it too because it was weighed with the wheat they bought. Thus, profit margins for the rich increased farther still, and the poor suffered – apparently to the point that many of them had to go into debt in order to feed their families. And when they couldn't pay their debts, they were sold into slavery – which is what our text means where it says “that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals”. The idea is that debt slaves became so plentiful and cheap that they could be purchased by the rich for the price of a pair of shoes. And that, according to our text, is what the people Amos was sent to warn about the impending judgments of God had intended all along. They wanted to get rich at the expense of their neighbors by any means possible so that they could use the power of their

wealth to control them – which sounds a lot to me like the ambition of most everyone right here in the good old USA. Certainly, it is to a large degree the way things have worked out on the international scene. And through various measures of subsidies and tariffs and unfair trade practices and maybe a threat when needed or a little saber rattling, we mean to keep it that way.

And for that reason we are in the eyes of much of the rest of the world, just like the Ferengi. And maybe we don't see it so clearly because on the home planet of the Ferengi everyone pretty much looks and acts the same, so they don't see how hideously ugly they really are inside and out. But through a text like the one we have before us this morning, the Lord is holding up a mirror so that we can see what we are; so that we can see these very same sins that Amos is denouncing in ourselves and understand that because of them the judgment and wrath of God are deservedly upon us.

Still, it's awfully hard to confess the collective sins of a nation. It's hard for any of us to feel personally guilty about a couple of centuries' worth of exploitation by leveraging our nation's great wealth and power around the world to put us in the position we are now. I mean, I didn't do it. You didn't. We merely inherited this position at the top of the pyramid of global wealth. We had the dumb luck to be born here – or rather, since we're thinking theologically, we were blessed by God to be placed here in this position of advantage. We have been given much – which means that much will be required of us. We can't simply shrug our shoulders and say, "What? Am I my brother's keeper?" As if the world's economic disparity and the crushing poverty and oppression that is the way of life for millions is none of our concern. Our God is a God of compassion. The poor and oppressed have a special place in his gracious heart, just as he has a special place in hell reserved for those who oppress them. Therefore as God's children we have an obligation to show compassion to the needy and do what is in our power to alleviate their suffering. We also need to support and press for measures that will bring an end to their misery – and again, let me make it clear that I'm a theologian, not an economist. I can't recommend specific courses of action because I don't know how much difference they'll make in the end. I'll leave that to you who are a lot smarter about such things to do what your conscience tells you is right – though a good start may be look at some of the human care and relief ministries of our church body.

But we really need to make this more personal still. Because the questions aren't so much, "How are we collectively guilty of these sins that Amos is talking about?" and "How can we working together try to make the world a better place for all?" Rather, for each one of us the questions are, "How am I guilty?" and "What can I do?" And to answer these questions we need to get to the root of the problem because it isn't so much greed or ambition or lack of compassion or the desire to control others that's driving the train here. These are only symptoms of a much deeper sickness – a sickness that is revealed quite clearly in this morning's text. Amos describes the people that he is condemning as saying to themselves, "When will the New Moon and Sabbath be over so that we can get back to business?" For them the days of rest prescribed by the Lord for his people – these holy times that he set aside for them to rest from their labors and to reflect upon his goodness and mercy to them – this time of worship and growth in his Word – this time for family and fellowship and sharing – it had all become a major inconvenience. They saw the holy days as obstacles to their relentless pursuit of wealth because time is money, and time spent not making money was in their estimation time wasted. And so we see them spending the holy days not resting and worshipping the one true God; but rather working quite hard planning their next acquisitions and thus effectively worshipping their false god: money.

Luther said that whatever it is that you place your trust in, anything you look to in order to provide you with meaning and purpose and comfort and a sense of security and to fill your life with happiness, whatever that thing is, that thing is your god. And that's why I find it ironically fitting that we place upon all of our currency and coin the national motto "In God we trust" because more often than not money is the god we put our trust in. We probably more than any other people define ourselves and derive our sense of worth and security by our income brackets and how much we have stashed away for a rainy day. In fact, the biggest goal in most of our lives is to achieve what we call "financial independence", which is the freedom of having amassed so much wealth that we never have to worry about how we're going to be taken care of. And therein lies the problem with the great god money that we worship: there is never so much of it that it can't all be lost in an instant or frittered away in time. We know that and we fear it. We know that there is no way to plan for every contingency and so there's never enough money to provide real security. And so, in order to

feel secure, we have to keep amassing more. And that's what tempts us to begin cutting corners, and taking advantage, and tilting the scales, and trampling the poor. When we worship the god cold hard cash, we become just like it: cold and hardhearted. And that's why Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and money."

But if, on the other hand, the Lord God who loved us and sent his Son to save us from our sin is the object of our trust, if he's the one we look to fill our lives with meaning and purpose and comfort and a sense of security and joy, well, then the amount of money we have or don't have is really beside the point, isn't it? Then we understand that one single promise of God spoken from a burning bush is worth far more than a thousand bags of gold in the hand. And he's given us more than just one promise. He has promised "I will be with you", "I will redeem you", "I will cleanse you of your sin", "I will deliver you from every evil", "I will teach you to walk in my ways", "I will crown you with glory", and "I will give you eternal life". Money can't make or keep a single one of those promises – and that's why it is both wicked and foolish to pursue it as if it could. But the Lord God can keep these promises, and he does fulfill every one of them for us through his Son, Jesus Christ. Let us therefore repent today of making a god out of money, and let's turn to him who is our only mediator and only Savior, asking him to cleanse us of this sin and reorder our thinking so that we trust in him and him alone. He will do it. He's given us his Word that cannot be broken. And he's also us his Spirit to direct our hearts and minds so that we can use the time, talents, and treasures that he has entrusted to our care in ways that will show his compassion and build up his kingdom of grace. I pray that God would do this work mightily among us, in Jesus name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***