

## Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 9, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

A couple of weeks ago, when we celebrated our Sunday liturgy, we celebrated the sacrament of baptism for one of the newest members of our parish family, and we do that periodically. So most of you (or all of you, I'm sure, at one point or another) have witnessed a baptism, and you may remember that during the baptism ceremony, after the water has been poured, the baby has been baptized, there are a couple of other small ceremonies that happen:

The baby is covered with a garment that reminds the baby and those of us who are witnessing, especially, that at our own baptism (the baptism of any person), you are clothed in Christ. You put on a new garment, a new life, the life of Jesus.

There is also the small ceremony of handing over of a lighted candle, lighted actually from the Easter candle, which is the symbol of the risen Christ. As Jesus was the light of the world, so too, the baptized person is to be the light of the world.

But then finally, there is the anointing ceremony after the baptism, anointing with chrism, and that's the oil that is used at the anointing of a king, the anointing of a priest. During that part of the ceremony, the celebrant of the baptism says, "As Jesus was anointed priest, prophet and king, so too you are to carry out those roles as a disciple of Jesus -- priest, prophet, king."

Today's Readings
Ezekiel 2:2-5
Psalm 123:1-2, 3-4
2 Corinthians 12:7-10
Mark 6:1-6
Full text of the readings

Now most of us, I feel certain, are familiar with Jesus as priest. Every time we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist, Jesus is in our midst in a special way, offering himself as he did on Calvary and giving up his life out of love for us, and then being raised to new life. This is the sacrifice of the new covenant that Jesus has established between God and all of the human family, "the covenant in my blood," so we're used to Jesus as a priest, and also Jesus as king.

Every year at the end of the church liturgical year, we celebrate the last Sunday of the year, the Feast of Christ the King -- Jesus as the one who carries out the role of God as reigning over all of the world, all of the universe; the God to whom all of us are subject as followers, as creatures, as part of the human family. The kingship of Jesus is something that we are familiar with and try to make it a kingship of service and love, as was the kingship of Jesus.

I think most of us probably are not very familiar with the idea that Jesus was prophetic, a prophet. There is no feast, "Jesus the Prophet." We don't talk about Jesus as our prophet. Even though we talk about Jesus as our high priest, Jesus as king, we don't usually think of Jesus as prophet. But in the readings today, if we listen to them (and next Sunday, we look forward to those readings), we discover for the next couple of Sundays at least, the Church is guiding us to think about, reflect on, this role of Jesus as prophet and of course, what would be our

role as prophetic people, our church as a prophetic church, some members of our church standing out as prophets.

For a few minutes then, it's important that we look at this role of prophet. In our first lesson today, we hear about Ezekiel, one of the major prophets of the Old Testament. Ezekiel was called, as we heard in the reading, "Son of man, stand up while I am about to speak to you." Then Ezekiel says, "The spirit came upon me as God spoke and kept me standing, and then I heard God speak, "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a people who have rebelled against me. They and their ancestors have sinned against me to this day. Now I am sending you to these defiant and stubborn people to tell them, "This is God's word," to speak to them.

A prophet is one who speaks on behalf of God. A prophet is one who hears the message of God and speaks it. It can be an individual, like Ezekiel, or you're familiar with other main prophets in the Old Testament -- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Nehemiah, Zechariah -- there are so many of them. These are people who have been chosen by God to be prophets. Through baptism (as we just heard from the ceremony), everyone is baptized and anointed with that holy oil, to carry on the role of Jesus as prophet, to speak on behalf of God.

Something to note, in case we might miss it in today's lesson from Ezekiel, because there will be those who say, "What good does it do?" and God says whether they listen or not, this set of rebels will know there is a prophet among them. God tells Ezekiel, "You'll have to keep on speaking regardless of whether the people seem to hear or not to hear. The important thing is that God's word is proclaimed." That is, again, what we are called to do as prophetic people, a prophetic church.

The role of the prophet is also -- as we hear in the life of those various prophets and through the scriptures, as we see in the life of Jesus, who was a prophet to speak on behalf of the poor, the marginalized, those who are voiceless. The prophet becomes the voice of those who have no voice. A modern example, many years ago, we are familiar, I think, with Archbishop Oscar Romero from El Salvador, who became known throughout the world as one who spoke for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed within that country of El Salvador.

Because of his prophetic voice, he actually spoke through his death. He was murdered because he was giving a voice to the voiceless. So that is the role of the prophet, to give a voice to the voiceless, and to be on the side of the poor. The prophets also -- Oscar Romero, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel -- all of them, modern prophets, they speak what is the most radical part of the message of God and in our case as followers of Jesus, the radical message of Jesus, such things as what we call the preferential option for the poor.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." Blessed are those who are not into accumulating lots of goods, but rather who rely on God and God's goodness and God's love. The prophet reaches into the message of God and for us, the message of Jesus, of enemy love, the radical part: Don't just love those who love you; love your enemy, do good to those who hurt you.

The message of reconciliation -- this is part of the radical message of Jesus: "Even if you're going to the altar to offer your gift and there, you remember someone has something against you, leave your gift, go first, be reconciled." We're not used to thinking of reconciliation as being so ultimately important in our life, and the most important thing for us to do if we really want to worship God.

The radical teaching of giving up violence: Be peacemakers, those who try to transform the world and transform hateful situations, not through responding with hate, but with love, so the transforming power of love. This is a radical message of Jesus. So that is the role of the prophet, to speak for God, be God's spokesperson, to speak on behalf of those who have no voice, to speak the most radical part of our religious tradition that Jesus demonstrated in his own speaking, his own preaching, but also in the way he lived, the way he died, forgiving those who put him to death. The radical teaching of Jesus becomes what the prophet has to proclaim.

If we then take a few moments to think about prophecy in our own time, I've already mentioned Oscar Romero as a prophet. There are those who teach us to live according to the radical way of the gospel. The work of Dorothy Day, perhaps many of you have not heard of her -- her cause for canonization is in Rome now. This is a person who began what we call the "Catholic Worker Movement," a movement where people come together in small communities and try to live the radical life of the gospel in a very clear way, those who participate in religious life and take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

It's an attempt to try to live prophetically, the way of Jesus, but every one of us and our whole church has to live a prophetic life and to be that prophetic witness of Jesus in the world, to be those who speak what God calls us to speak in order to bring God's word, God's message, into our world, to make that message the powerful instrument it can be, to change our world, to bring about the reign of God, the time where God's goodness, God's love, God's peace, God's joy, will fill every person, fill our universe, transform it.

This is what the prophet is to do, to be that kind of a witness within the world. And today, there are many ways in which we could reflect on our own individual roles as being prophetic, the role of our church as being prophetic, doing these things: Speak for God, speak on behalf of the poor and the marginalized, speak the radical message -- many ways. But one that is current, so current that there's a large article in the paper this morning about President Obama's trip to Russia.

He's leaving this afternoon to go to Russia, and on his agenda, one of the most important things, as he sees his role, but important, I would say, from the point of view of what's going to happen in our world, President Obama is going to put forward the need to rid the world of nuclear weapons, to reverse the arms race -- something that we as a church had prophetically spoken to.

Here in the United States back in 1983, the Catholic bishops, after a process that involved tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Catholic people throughout our country, published a pastoral letter called "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise, Our Response." It was a pastoral letter that dealt with this very issue, pointed out that at no time could you ever use a nuclear weapon in a morally acceptable way. We had to reject these weapons, had to end the arms race, especially the race to develop more and more such weapons that threaten the very existence of our planet.

This was a prophetic message that was carried throughout the world at that point. It's fallen into disuse. Many of us probably have a hard time even remembering that time back in '83, if we were aware of it then. Of course, many, many people who are in our church now weren't present then, did not know about it, have not learned about it since, but that was a prophetic church at the moment.

Now President Obama is bringing forward this message once more. There will be times now, during the coming months, when there will be controversy in our country about whether we should strengthen what is called the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the treaty that almost every nation in the world has signed, that calls upon the world nations who do not have such weapons, not to develop them; those who have them, to move toward disarmament.

There is the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which our nation has signed but it's never been ratified, so it hasn't become part of our law. That's a treaty to make sure we do not carry out any tests that would enable us to get new weapons of mass destruction. President Obama will be pushing for the ratification of that treaty. What will our church do? What will you do? Will we be on the side of this prophetic voice? Will we try to reach back into that radical teaching of Jesus and say, "This is the way that I should go. This is the way our church should go, to be rid of such weapons, to end the arms race, especially the nuclear arms race?"

Will we be willing to be prophetic? Will our church be prophetic? We've fallen short of this in the past two or

three decades. It's very important, I think (and the lessons today urge us to this), to be that prophet like Ezekiel, God sends to say God's word, and even if you think people won't listen, you must say it anyway; to be like Jesus, who goes into the synagogue in his home town before his own relatives, his family, who say, "Who is this?" and they reject him, even, at that point.

Are we willing to be like Jesus, be the one who says God's word, even if it risks our being rejected? It's difficult to be a prophet, because sometimes you can be a prophet who speaks out of a kind of arrogance, "I know what is right." That isn't the way Jesus did it. It's not the way he called the prophets to do it, or his followers to do it. It's to do it with the spirit of love, to be a reluctant prophet, one who isn't saying, "I know everything. I know what is right," but one who is trying to listen deeply to God's word and to say it firmly, gently, but persistently and lovingly, to say that word, and even if it means rejection, to keep on saying it.

It's so important that we hear this message about the prophetic Jesus, the prophetic role of our church, the prophetic call to each one of us, and that we pray over it, try to discover "How I am to carry out this role that was given to me when I was baptized, anointed with that chrism, to be priest, prophet and king, as Jesus was?" I know that many people will find this a difficult teaching, a difficult call, and perhaps we hesitate to accept it because we really are very hesitant to carry out what St. Paul spoke to us in the second lesson today, where Paul says, "Gladly I will boast of my weakness, that the strength of Jesus may be mine. So I rejoice when I suffer infirmities, humiliations, want, persecutions, all for Christ, for when I am weak, then I am strong."

This is one of the profound mysteries about Jesus and about our following of Jesus. If we become weak, then Jesus can work strongly through us, but that requires that we rejoice even when we suffer persecution, humiliation, infirmities, but do it for Christ. Will we have the courage? Will our church have the courage to accept this role of weakness so that strong message of Jesus, the powerful message of Jesus, that message of love, will be spoken through us and be the message that can save our planet, save our world, help to carry on the work of Jesus, of bringing the reign of God into our midst? I pray that you and I will reflect on the role of prophet, "my role as prophet," each of us, on our church's role as prophet. Pray, reflect on it and beseech God to make every one of us and our church the prophetic voice of God that we are called to be through our baptism.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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