

## The perils of prophesying

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Jan. 28, 2012

Like two sacred bookends, the first reading from Deuteronomy and the Marcan Gospel complement one another. Together, they attest to the truth that God's promises are always fulfilled. Speaking for God, Moses announced that God would raise up from among the Israelites a prophet who would also speak for God, as he did. "Listen to this prophet," advised Moses. When the Marcan Jesus began his public ministry in Capernaum's synagogue, those present sensed that his words were empowered by God. He spoke with such authority that even evil spirits listened and obeyed.

In the end, for all his efforts at speaking and living for God, Jesus would be rejected, tortured and put to death. Paul (second reading), who spoke for God in his many letters and through the witness of his life, would also die for his commitment.

Through the centuries, God has repeatedly fulfilled the promise that prophets will be raised up to speak the truth. God raised up Stephen, who railed against the establishment in order to awaken its sense of mission and purpose. Stephen was stoned to death as he spoke for God. In the third Christian Century, God raised up Perpetua and Felicity, who steadfastly proclaimed their belonging to Christ, and for their beliefs were tortured by wild animals in the Roman arena and then killed by the sword. God raised up Joan of Arc, who spoke for God to her 15th-century French contemporaries. Found guilty by an ecclesiastical court, she was burned at the stake at the age of 19. God raised up Thomas Becket, who, as archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th century, defied Henry II and, for his truthfulness, was murdered in the cathedral as he prayed Vespers.



Nearer to our times, God raised up Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran

theologian and pastor who stood in solidarity with those oppressed by the Third Reich and was subsequently hanged in the Nazi concentration camp at Flossenbürg. God also raised up Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit priest who dared to speak of God and love and communion in ways that others with lesser imaginations could not understand. He delved into evolution with the sure faith that Christ was at the center of the creative process. As God's prophet, de Chardin celebrated his "Mass on the World" with the Earth itself as the altar and the labors and sufferings of humankind as the offering. For his prophetic efforts, de Chardin was censured, exiled and condemned during his life. Nevertheless, shortly before he died on April 19, 1955, he had the courage and strength to write, "I throw myself my God on your word ... the man who is filled with an impassioned love of Jesus -- him the earth will lift up in the immensity of her arms and will enable him to contemplate the face of God" (Let Me Explain, Collins, 1970).

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 95

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Mark 1:21-28

[Full text of the readings \[1\]](#)

God also raised up Mohandas Gandhi, who identified with the poor of the world and the untouchables of his native India; he spoke out for their rights, he fasted and he insisted on absolutely nonviolent protests even when British soldiers fired on a peaceful gathering, murdering more than 1,000 at Amritsar in 1919.

Also called by God was Martin Luther King Jr., American civil rights advocate, whose prophetic voice was silenced by an assassin in April 1968. Ignacio Ellacur'a, Ignacio Mart'n-Baró, Segundo Montes, Amando López, Joaquin López y López and Juan Ramón Moreno lifted their voices to speak and write in defense of the oppressed poor in El Salvador; they too were brutally murdered, as was their archbishop, Oscar Romero. Of Romero, theologian Virgilio Elizondo once wrote, "In moments of great suffering and cries, God has always raised great prophets among us to straighten the ways of humanity?" (A Message of Hope, Celebration Books, 1981).

While Elizondo's observation rings true, it is also true that humankind has a nasty habit of killing the very prophets God sent to help them. Although we ourselves may not wield the gun or the noose or machete, if we remain indifferent to the truth of their words and the witness of their lives, then we too are complicit in the deaths of our prophets. This stark reality reaches out to take hold of us today; it shakes us where we stand and demands our attention. It urges us to do as the Deuteronomist (first reading) advises: listen to those whom God raises up to speak. Let us be astonished and amazed at the power of the prophetic word as were Jesus' contemporaries (Gospel) who let themselves be taught by him. Then, if it should happen that God taps us into the service of the word, then let us follow the lead of those who have gone before us. Let us speak God's word clearly, courageously and without stinting, even at the very dear cost of our lives.

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