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Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 19, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

Last Sunday we reflected on Jesus in a role that we don?t often give to Jesus in our reverence and worship of him -- Jesus as a prophet; Jesus as one who speaks on behalf of God and proclaims God?s Word. And as we reflected on Jesus as prophet, we were especially drawn to reflect on how he, as a prophet, was rejected.

In fact last Sunday, the first lesson was about another prophet, Ezekiel, who had the same experience. He was sent by God to proclaim God?s Word and he knew ahead of time that they would not listen. But God said to Ezekiel, "You must speak the Word anyway. At least they will know there?s been a prophet in their midst." And so, clearly, it can often happen that a prophet is rejected.

Today we continue to reflect on the role of prophecy in the church, Jesus as prophet, his first disciples, beginning of the church, the community of disciples as prophets. And ultimately we have to think about ourselves as being a prophetic community. With the risks that that might entail, of being rejected, not being listened to. But it is part of our calling.

Today?s lesson and the role of prophecy, I think, becomes a little bit more clear in that first lesson of the prophet Amos. To understand what was happening, we should know that Amos was from the part of the chosen people, the kingdom of Judah, that had been split away from the kingdom of Israel. The kingdom of Israel was very rich and prosperous, the king was Jeroboam, and his chief priest was Amaziah, as we heard in the lesson. Amos is a shepherd, out of the kingdom of Judah, called by God, though, to leave his work as shepherd and go into the mighty kingdom of Israel -- the rich and powerful kingdom -- and there speak God?s word. And he speaks the word that is threatening to the king. "Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, then sent word to King Jeroboam. Amos is conspiring against you in the very center of Israel. What he says goes too far. These are his very words, ?Jeroboam shall die by the sword and Israel shall be exiled from its land.?" That was God?s word to the king. But Amaziah, the priest who was protecting the king, did not want him to hear that word, and Jeroboam did not want to hear it. So Amaziah says to Amos, "Leave here, you?re just a shepherd, get out of here, go back to where you came from. We don?t need you." And what had happened? The king, supposedly, had a group of prophets, and he had this priest, Amaziah, who was the priest in the king?s chapel at Bethel. But that priest and those prophets always said only what they thought the king wanted to hear, they were not true prophets. So that?s why God had to raise up somebody like Amos who could speak the truth, and who would speak the truth, no matter what.

This was a development that took place as the chosen people began to become more structured into a structured religious community. You know, in the very beginning, when God chose the people of Abraham and Sarah and then later on made the covenant with them through Moses, there was no structure, they were simply God?s people. First moving through the desert, then becoming established. It was only later that they began to have a

structure. They asked for a king and God gave them a king, even though God said it would not be for their best interest.

Then they began to institutionalize their religious practice. This is usually what happens -- you start with someone who?s very charismatic -- Moses, leading the people. Then Moses becomes overwhelmed by the responsibilities and he sets up the structure of the 70 elders and later on the whole priestly structure. Well all of that, then, begins to act in a way to protect the structure, the institution. People tend to forget the original mission. That?s what had happened to the chosen people, to God? people. They had a temple or a sanctuary, they had a priesthood, and they had prophets, but they really weren?t speaking God?s words. The priests were not really challenging the king or the people, they were there only to protect the institutional structure. And that?s why God had to raise up someone like Amos ? to come and tell the truth. This outsider, this person who had no claim to any special authority, a poor shepherd, but one speaking God?s Word.

If we take all of that and think about ourselves as the community of disciples of Jesus and the church, which is how we name our community, haven?t we done some of the same things that the chosen people did? We?ve established structures, we?ve established an institutional church, and that?s so different from what it was in the beginning. Did you hear in today?s Gospel? Jesus has drawn together a community of disciples -- they?re all equal in freedom and dignity, there?s no ones that are above the others, and no ones ruling the others. And he sends them out to preach the Word. To say God?s message. They are to go out without any wealth, without any power, without any worldly tool that will enable them to force themselves on others. They go out poor, they go out without any structured community. They go out simply to say God?s word. And so the message begins to spread.

We could think, I suppose, why couldn?t it always be that way? We do need some structure. If we depended only on charismatic leaders, pretty soon the community would fall apart, and so we need some structure. But the danger is that at some point, we make too much of the structure, too much of the institution, and not enough of the message of the Word of God that we?re supposed to be hearing and living and proclaiming.

But God still sends those who come from outside sometimes, who try to awaken us to become what we?re really called to be ? a community of disciples of Jesus. I think of World War II as an example where our church failed in the face of a tyranny and an evil that was unbelievably evil -- the Nazi tyranny. The church in Germany failed to speak a prophetic word to that tyranny. Why? Because they had entered into an agreement with the Nazi dictatorship in 1933. Hitler would allow the church to have its schools if the bishops of the church would agree they would not allow their priests to preach any so-called political message. And so the Church became virtually silent during those years. There were a few exceptions -- a peasant in Austria, Franz Jägerstätter, and a few others like him said, "No! I won?t serve in Hitler?s army," and he was executed. A whole group of young people connected with the universities called the White Rose group -- the same thing -- they spoke the truth; most of them were executed. The church refused to listen. It was more concerned about its institutional structures than about God?s Word. So we failed.

Our side too failed in World War II. The Allies, led by the United States, began to engage in carpet bombing of cities, killing hundreds of thousands of people -- innocent people. It all culminated in Hiroshima in 1945. Not a word of protest from any church leader that we were destroying innocent people with weapons of mass destruction. Later on Pope Paul VI described what happened at Hiroshima as a "butchery of untold magnitude." That was 30 years later when we finally condemned what had happened. Paul also pointed out that there had

been a prophet whom if we had listened to we might have moved differently or acted differently because in the same document where he wrote that this was a "butchery of untold magnitude," Paul said, "Who is the model for our day?" At a time when that kind of violence is being perpetrated, who is the model? The poor, weak man, Gandhi, who had been leading a nonviolent revolution in India during those same years, following the message of Jesus, proclaiming God?s Word. But we never listened, so we committed the atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. God does provide prophets to speak to us, but we have to be ready to listen.

Sometimes those prophets come, again, from outside our community. One of the crucial issues of our time is the issue of what we?re doing to our planet. A few weeks ago the Catholic bishops met for their semi-annual meeting and as you may know, one of the most important things we discussed, according to the bishops? criteria of importance, was translations of the liturgy, the words that we use at Mass. Now we?re supposed to say, "The Lord be with your spirit," instead of "The Lord be with you." Does it really make that much difference? Instead of talking about something like the sin we are committing against our world. But there is a prophet who is speaking about that. One who has been marginalized to some extent -- Albert Gore. He?s written a book and now has a documentary called, "An Inconvenient Truth." Will we listen and save our planet? Or will we continue to destroy it as we seem to be doing very rapidly?

These are the kinds of things that we have to be concerned about, issues that are very important. The use of violence in the war we started in Iraq has now escalated to total turmoil in the Middle East, because we refused to listen to those who say violence is wrong. We refuse still to listen to a prophet like Gandhi who showed us the way of Jesus even though he himself was a Hindu.

Perhaps as we reflect upon what Amos did and his experience, as we reflect on the other prophet, Ezekiel, most of all as we think about Jesus and the prophetic group that he sent out, maybe we as a community will recommit ourselves to follow this simple way of Jesus ? the way that rejects wealth, power and violence. Reject that way and listen to those prophets in our midst who tell us that God?s way is a way of simplicity, a way of love, a way of nonviolence, a way that really can make the reign of God happen.

Not only must we listen to these other prophets, but again we ourselves as a community of disciples of Jesus must listen deeply to God speaking in our own hearts, listen deeply and then we ourselves become a prophetic community, speaking the truth about the environment, speaking the truth about how to bring peace into the world and perhaps be those who are the faithful community of Jesus, the ones he sends out in today?s Gospel. He is sending us out and we must commit ourselves to go out in the way that he described and say his words and bring his message of peace and love into our world.

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