

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

July 8, 2012

Catholics stand in the long tradition of the biblical prophets whose stories we hear each week in the Liturgy of the Word. This Sunday, all three readings celebrate prophetic voices. There is, first of all, Ezekiel. He lived in a time when Israel's great age of independence had collapsed and God's people were living in exile. And so the fiery prophet had the freedom to break from the old ways and to call out for a brand-new way of life, while keeping the ancient tradition of Israel's trust in God. He always began with gloom but ended with consolation.

Then we heard from Saint Paul, who often wrote some of his best letters not sitting on an office chair in his library but on the floor of a rat-infested prison. We heard his words today to the church in Corinth, a church that was besieged by false prophets who boasted of their ecstasies, visions and miracles. Saint Paul doesn't confront the false prophets, the nay-sayers of our day, from a position of strength but from a position of weakness. He tells the Corinthians that whenever he was tempted to become proud like the false prophets, he was always knocked down a notch with what he described as a "thorn in the flesh."

Medical experts and theologians have argued for years about just what this "thorn in the flesh" was. Some say it was epilepsy, others an eye disorder, still others a chronic depression. The problem with all this is that the patient has been dead for two thousand years! It's not the sickness but what Paul does with the thorn in his flesh that's important. Paul sees his thorn in the flesh as a limitation that reminds him that although he is God's prophet, he is not God. He is a person in whom God dwells.

And finally comes Jesus, the prophet not welcomed in his hometown of Nazareth, because they knew who he was, he was one of them, Mary's son, the carpenter they had known for thirty years. How could he possibly be a prophet when what he said often went against the religious traditions and interpretations of his day? A campus minister recently evaluated Jesus as a pastor in today's church.

Personal habits:

Hygiene: Owns only one set of clothes. Ability to communicate: Does not speak English. Reaction to stress: Breaks into sweat and tears.

Sermons:

Preparation: Speaks impromptu. Content: Excessive reliance on stories.

Style: Strives for novelty and speaks at great length.

Audience reaction: Generally outrage. Many want to throw him off a cliff.

Our three Scripture readings today remind us of who a real prophet is. We need this reminder because we are beginning to hear once again in our land the talk of certain self-proclaimed prophets who preach not the Word of God but a word of hatred and bigotry. The Bible always insists that a prophetic minority has more to say to a nation than any majority, silent, moral, or any other. In fact, majorities in the Bible generally end up stoning the prophets.

The biggest problem of the false prophet is that it offers us the fear choice, not the growth choice. It wants to go back to the time when the United States owned the world, when women were in the kitchen, gays in the closet, nuns in habit, and minorities in their place. It was so backward that its people in some parts of my former home in the Skagit didn't want their children to study the origin of the human race.

But today, as we remember Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., Archbishop Romero, our own Archbishop Hunthausen, Ezekiel, Saint Paul, and Jesus Christ, who was not welcomed by his own, we are reminded that real prophets respect the past but always offer a message for the present and the future so that we can keep growing not only as a nation and as a church but as God's beloved people.

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor