

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

February 3, 2013

The compilers of the Lectionary frequently purged passages from Scripture they didn't like or that didn't fit their themes. We find an example of this today in the First Reading, about Jeremiah. The compilers leave verse 6 out of our reading today. That verse reads: "Ah. Lord God!" I said, 'I know not how to speak; I am too young.' But the Lord answered me, Say not, 'I am too young.' To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak."

By purging this verse from the reading we tend to forget that Jeremiah, like all great prophets, was reluctant to follow his calling. Even the great Moses protested to the Lord that he couldn't be a prophet because he had a speech impediment. And so we are robbed here of Jeremiah's own inner struggles; we might even forget his depression and how he once cursed the day he was born.

Although the compilers of the Lectionary do not purge any of the verses of our Gospel today, it would have been easier for us if they had. For isn't this a strange story? First, the people praise the homily Jesus preaches to them. Then they switch gears and turn into an unruly mob and seek to throw him not just out of town but over the hill. And what about the ending of the story? The solitary Jesus walks away from the mob and goes on his way untouched.

There is a wide body of material from biblical scholars on how to unravel Luke's story. Some claim Jesus preached two homilies. The first homily was preached during Jesus' "honeymoon period," while the second was preached once they understood just what he was telling them. The first was accepted by his neighbors, but the second was not because he told them that they did not have priority with God; indeed, it is in another rival town, Capernaum, where many pagans lived, that Jesus performed his wonders.

Some might think the people in the crowd turned on Jesus because they just couldn't get it in their heads that such wisdom could come from a hometown boy: "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" But others claim this is not why the crowd turned on Jesus. They claim that the people of Nazareth were not cynical about the preacher's origins. The people were simply surprised and amazed at their hometown boy. Actually the people in the story are a lot like us today who believe that an expert is somebody from out of town carrying a briefcase.

And of course the story ends with the remarkable line: he "passed through the midst of them and went away." Some used to think that it was a miracle that Jesus was able to escape being hurled over the hill. Others claim that Luke wants to offer a theological point: Just as Jesus walked through their midst and continued his mission, later on his crucifixion would also fail to stop his mission, which was to bring salvation to all people.

We cannot sanitize this story from Luke. We cannot purge from it the harsh realities of being a prophet. We cannot escape the fact that Jesus' own neighbors rejected him because he disturbed them. The people spoke highly of Jesus and were amazed by him when he spoke of liberation. It is when they realized that his liberation to which they were called also included people outside their little circle that anger and violence erupted.

In our own time we have witnessed the martyrdom of someone who once was a reluctant prophet: Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador. He once preached: "It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world; a very spiritualistic word, a word without any commitment to history, a word that can sound in any part of the world because it belongs to no part of the world. A word that creates no problems, starts no conflicts." Jesus did not offer us a spiritualist word, a word without any commitment to history. He got into trouble once he became specific: "a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon" and the leper Naaman the Syrian. After all, how could the God of Israel's plan of salvation embrace the pagans, the Gentiles?

I suppose there are times when all of us would like to purge from the Gospels stories like today's because they anger us, frighten us, disturb us because they are specific. They challenge our comfort, self-assurance, and smugness. We come to Eucharist to be comforted, to be amazed at God's gracious words. But today we are reminded that Jesus and those who continue his mission have another important charge: to disturb us when we are locked in our own little circle and not to offer sensitivity guidelines but a prophetic call.

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