

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Aug 31st 2014

Perhaps today should be called “Prophecy Sunday”. We start with Jeremiah. Prophecy was not a job he wanted. “You tricked me Lord” he tells God. And what did he get? Derision and reproach. Why? Well, the job of a prophet was not to serve as fortune teller (as perhaps we might think). It was to be God’s spokesperson, to tell people they are not doing what God wants, that they are not running the world the way God intended it to be run.

A prophet’s job didn’t stop with words though. A prophet was to show by his/her life how God wanted people to live and govern. A prophet had to “walk the walk”. And a prophet was to witness God’s vision for humanity to those in charge – at obvious risk to the prophet’s physical health. Nobody likes to hear that his priorities are wrong, especially those who are in a position of power.

Jesus was a prophet (He was more than that, of course, but prophet was the role He played as God incarnate). He anticipates His fate as a prophet in today’s gospel (“suffer greatly from the rulers”), and He straightens Peter out, Peter who, like Jeremiah, would rather that their prophetic message would be received with joy and gratefulness. Dreamer!

No, fidelity to a prophet’s role (and to ours as the successors of the prophets) will bring mainly shame. “Take up your cross . . .” Shaming was what carrying the crossbeam through the city was intended to do: humiliate the criminal. That’s Jeremiah’s “derision and reproach”. And that’s what behind Paul’s exhortation in the second reading, not to “conform yourselves to this age . . .”

As Jesus’ role was to be a prophet, so is the Church’s – first in its early days, but no less today. Our vocation is the same as that of the early Christians – to serve as prophets, both to those in power (state and church) and also to our Christian brothers and sisters who, too often, have “conformed” themselves to this age. God clearly wants us to hear the prophets among us and to take what they say seriously – however uncomfortable it may make us feel. And we should look in the mirror ourselves; how “conformed” are we?

As a society we may be a little more humane than the rulers in Jesus’ time. (After all, we don’t line the roads with crucified rebels as the Romans did.) But power is still abused massively. Worth is still defined by wealth. Today in the U.S., people are driven into poverty and homelessness, despite working full-time. Even our clothing and foods are the products of little more than slave labor. What are we to do? We feel helpless. Just look the other way? Don’t make waves?

No, we are called to take seriously the missionary charge at the end of Mass “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your lives.” That’s the missioning of a prophet. “By our lives” means more than virtue and piety, observing the rules and receiving the sacraments – though those are good traits to have. (But remember: the Pharisees did that much.) When Jesus didn’t know what to do next, He spent the night in prayer, asking His father to show Him what He should do next. That’s a good place for us to start, too.

One thing we should recognize: not “conforming to this age” will put us out on the margins – where we could encounter “derision and reproach”. However, as Pope Francis has assured us, that is precisely where the Church needs to be. And the Church, as always, is us.

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