

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

Ez 2:2-5

Ps 123:1-2, 2, 3-4

II Cor 12:7-10

Mk 6:1-6

James D. Paradis, O.S.A.

Last week, as I celebrated my ordination anniversary, I remembered with fondness Frank Murphy, the auxiliary bishop of Baltimore who ordained me to the priesthood 15 years ago. Bishop Murphy, who died several years ago, was a man whose heart brimmed with compassion for those in need—the poor, the elderly, those living with HIV-AIDS. He was also a champion for women’s concerns in the Church during the 1980s and 90s. Having undergone a conversion experience following some heated listening sessions with women, Bishop Murphy became convinced that the entire Church, especially the bishops, needed to listen prayerfully and attentively to women’s voices, to learn from their experience and respond pastorally to their concerns. At one point he publicly called for the Church to fully examine the effects of patriarchy and to pronounce it a sin. He went further in calling for the consideration of opening priestly ordination to women. Justice, he said, demanded it and the pastoral needs of the Church required it.

I spoke with Bishop Murphy shortly after he issued this bold challenge to the American bishops and to church teaching. “Pray for me,” he said. “It’s going to be a painful period.” His great fear was that by openly sharing his opinion and critique he would be seen as a traitor, disloyal to the Church. As it turned out, a number of bishops distanced themselves publicly from Bishop Murphy and his stand. In other quarters, he was labeled a troublemaker. Even knowing the opposition he would face, he felt compelled to speak, whether or not people would listen. To him it was a matter of standing for what is right in caring for the Church.

I thought of Bishop Murphy again as I looked at this Sunday’s readings which highlight prophetic leadership. Over the summer we will listen to the voices of the prophets of old who called people of their time to stop, pay attention to what the Lord was saying and return to God’s ways. The prophets spoke for God, often bringing unpopular messages. More often than not—even from their own neighbors—they experienced rejection: “If you don’t like the message, shoot the messenger!”

Today we hear first from Ezechiel. God gives him the unpleasant, nearly impossible task of going to his own people and telling them that because of their unfaithfulness to the Lord, their temple in Jerusalem would be demolished. This was not going to be a receptive crowd for poor Ezechiel. He knew the hardheartedness of his people, yet he had to speak the truth as he saw it out of love for God and concern for his people. Of course, he paid dearly for delivering the news.

Saint Paul was called to be a prophet from the time of his conversion to Christ. He is writing today to the church which he founded in Corinth. The Christian community there was a mess—false prophets were challenging Paul’s authority, boasting about their own revelations and attempting to draw in their own followers through charismatic speech, all done at the expense of caring for the needy. Paul feels compelled to defend himself in his prophetic role,

but rather than fighting with his opponents on the one hand, or despairing of his situation on the other, he adopts a faith stance of humility and weakness. All he can do, he says, is “boast of my weakness,” knowing that God would give him the grace to be strong. The “thorn in the flesh” was for Paul a gift to keep him somehow aware of his insufficiency, tied to Christ and the power of his grace. In this way of weakness and reliance, Paul reveals that the prophet’s work, if authentic, is “not about me,” but about God and serving God’s Reign.

In the Gospel Jesus comes to his hometown of Nazareth. He is the greatest of all prophets and the townspeople are initially astonished at his teaching, but then they become suspicious: how could such wisdom and power come from this “nobody” we grew up with? They “took offense at him,” rejecting him personally, even those nearest and dearest to him. Mark’s gospel portrays the ministry of Jesus to be one long story of invitation and rejection.

Looking at today’s readings, it is one thing to celebrate the prophetic voices of Ezechiel, Paul and Christ—and to hear about a bishop who stepped into this role. It’s quite another to risk accepting this gift in our own lives. As we see, the prophet’s job is often a thankless one, where we have to be open to being disliked, if not scapegoated and hung out to dry. This is especially so in our culture where we do not want questioned what Dominican priest Timothy Radcliffe calls our “worship of the false idols that rule the global village”: idols like our “unlimited desire” for food, drink, sex, the perfect body, the edgiest car, the perennial upgrade. Idols like our property and the striving for money as an end in itself.

What might we hear, for example, if we stepped into a prophetic role questioning our entitlements, our excessive attachments? What’s the reaction when we risk calling people out of denial? When we say that the World Cup indeed has a dark side—in the human trafficking of women and girls? When we renounce the forces that cheapen or destroy human life? When we pronounce as unjust and wrong the way someone is being treated at work? When we call into question the way that we speak about foreigners in general or illegal immigrants in our midst? The way we speak about women or gay people? I wonder what we might hear: *What do you expect me to do about it? Get a life! Where do you get off telling me this? Mind your own business. Who died and left you God? Get outta my face—you do your thing, I’ll do mine.*

Truth be told, it seems safer to hang back—as many of us do. Yet as disciples of Jesus, our baptism makes us prophets. We’re called not only to remind people of the outlandish love of God for them, but to challenge them that this love demands a change from business as usual—as God’s redeemed people, called for expanding the table of the Lord, building a brighter world in the image of his risen life, of justice, peace and freedom. To be holy as God is holy.

Where are today’s prophets, we might ask? They are in you and me—when we take seriously the risk of answering God’s call, knowing that there will always be rejection of some sort. Where do we start as prophets? I don’t know—perhaps by listening first to our own life, our own biases, our own sin and unfaithfulness—and realizing God’s mercy and graciousness that keeps calling us forward as his messengers. By embracing our weakness, our own “thorns” that remind us that our power as prophetic people is only in him who sustains us. Only then can we dare to be true prophets for the good of others and the world.