

15th Sunday of Ordinary Time – July 12, 2015

- What is a prophet? Are they just the people recorded as prophets in the Bible, like Moses or Ezekiel? Are there modern prophets? Have you ever met one? Do you know about anyone you would call a prophet?
- One seemingly obvious answer might be that prophets are people who prophesy. But this raises even more questions. Is it foretelling the future? Is it different from telling fortunes?
- Well, I think I have asked enough questions. Let's see if we can find some answers, and of course a good place to start is with the readings for both this Sunday and the last since they have a fair bit to say about prophets and prophesying.
- Last Sunday, the emphasis was on the difficulty of being a prophet, the lack of respect they encounter, especially in their own land. What we learned is that people don't always listen to prophets or they reject what they hear.
- This Sunday's readings tell us few more things.
- In the first reading, Amaziah the priest of Bethel recognizes Amos as a "seer", but tells him not to prophesy at Bethel, "for it is the king's sanctuary".
- Amaziah's advice is based on politics and worldly power. Basically, he is saying that prophesying is all well and good as long as it doesn't conflict with the Government.
- So, don't rock the boat with talk about how the rich oppress the poor or how corrupt the legal system is. Prophets are supposed to toe the line.
- Amos's answer is quite interesting. He at first denies that he is a prophet. He says he is just a farmer, a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees. But in the next breath, he says that he is doing what God told him to do: "prophesy to my people Israel".
- His answer demonstrates two important things about prophets and prophesying.
- The first is that their prophesying is rooted in God, it is speaking what God wants us to hear. The Greek roots of this word are "speaking for", in this case speaking for God.

- The second thing Amos demonstrates is that what we are talking about here is action rather than status. “Prophet” is simply a label we give to some people; what really counts is not the label, but what a person does.
- So Amos is not a prophet, but he prophesies. And if this is not quite what the king would want to hear, then so be it.
- These days, this is called speaking truth to power.
- This can be a difficult thing to do, even if you are on the inside with a position as an adviser to someone in power and that person has a firm idea of what they want to do.
- You are left with a choice: do you toe the line and soft-pedal your advice? Or do you give your advice and take the consequences? Or do you resign and stop giving advice to power and instead speak to those who have no power?
- Amaziah, the priest took the first choice. Amos, the farmer, took the second one. It’s not hard to tell which one was the prophet.
- It’s also not hard to see that prophets did not live only in biblical times. There are still people among us who speak the inconvenient truth of God’s word.
- One of the best examples is Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador who ended up paying the ultimate price for what he said.
- He had been a somewhat conservative cleric, distancing himself from his brethren in the El Salvadorean clergy who were more involved in the political life of his country.
- But a few weeks after his consecration as archbishop in 1977, a close friend, Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest, was murdered. Romero reacted to his murder, saying: "When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead, I thought, 'If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.'"
- Romero became an outspoken critic of the government and a passionate defender of the dispossessed.

- In his last sermon, on Sunday March 23, 1980, Romero explained his vocation: “I have no ambition of power, and because of that I freely tell those in power what is good and what is bad, and I do the same with any political group — it is my duty.”
- His sermon continued: "I want to make a special appeal to soldiers, national guardsmen, and policemen: each of you is one of us. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear a man telling you to kill, remember God’s words, ‘thou shalt not kill.’ No soldier is obliged to obey a law contrary to the law of God. In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people, I beseech you, I implore you; in the name of God I command you to stop the repression!"
- The next evening at about 6:30pm, a gunman shot Romero as he celebrated Mass at a small chapel in the hospital where he lived.
- 35 years later on May 23 this year Oscar Romero was beatified and his spirit seems to be alive and well in Pope Francis. In today’s newspapers, the Pope is reported to be in Bolivia visiting inmates in a notorious prison, listening to their stories of suffering and deprivation and speaking out on their behalf against a demeaning and corrupt judicial system, as he has spoken in the past to denounce capital punishment and solitary confinement of prisoners.
- Very few of us are called to prophesy like Amos, Oscar Romero of the Pope. Or called as the Apostles were in the Gospel to cast out demons and heal the sick. But we are called nonetheless to share their commitment to live out the Word of God in our lives. Called to be part of the plan that Paul mentions in the second reading, “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.”
- We may not have to stand up to the power of the State as they did, but we can stand up to ideas that circulate about the righteousness of punishing the guilty, about making the poor take responsibility for their poverty and about protecting our borders from burdensome refugees.
- If we do not speak up about these things, they will solidify as norms of our society.

- We are called to prophesy in the sense of standing up for what is right and shaking off the dust that obscures the truth.

JMK

The reflection owes much to “Remembering Romero: Amos the Prophet v. Amaziah the Priest”, [Journey with Jesus, July 11, 2010](#).