

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Ezekiel 2:2-5 / Mark 6:1-6)
05.07.2015

In the gospel passage we read this morning we see how when Jesus appeared in His home town as the *Great Prophet* He was greeted with admiration and praise from among the people and, at the same time, with suspicion and even the rejection of many of their number.

Have things changed that much?

Prophetic figures still awaken contrasting responses.

Prophetic figures are, at one and the same time, admired by some and open to rejection by others; they are lauded by some and discredited by others.

Often people vacillate between these two contrasting reactions within themselves.

Indeed, *we* ourselves can vacillate between the two contrasting reactions.

Why does this happen?

Where does our difficulty with prophetic figures stem from?

I suppose, at one level, our contrasting attitudes betray the fact that sometimes we just do not know what to make out of people.

But, there are surely other factors that also come into play.

I suggest that we look a little more closely at today's gospel passage to see what it may have to say to us about how to situate ourselves in regard to those people the Lord sends our way as prophets: men and women, who like all God's prophets, both challenge and encourage us.

In the text we read we see how all began at Nazareth with the people's surprise.

The people exclaimed, it would appear admiringly, to begin with: *Where did the man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been granted him and these miracles that are worked through him?*

But, note how quickly things changed!

Things took a rapid about turn.

What happened in the meantime? What explains the fact that things turned around so quickly?

Well, Jesus' family identity was alluded to.

He was recognised as known to the people and seen as just one of them, if you like.

This is where things fell.

It is where things fall so often for ourselves too.

It is as if the people asked themselves: *How could someone, just like me, be sent by God to speak in His name and bear witness to Him?*

People are inclined to doubt that there is any possibility of God using someone just like themselves to be His messenger.

We may be inclined to doubt that God might use someone just like ourselves to speak to us!

When the people in the gospel story say that Jesus is just one of themselves, that they know his parents and his background, seed and generation, it is implied that they estimate Him to be a person of no great consequence for this very reason.

This is sometimes presented as evidence of the petty jealousy of Jesus' neighbours, but I think there is more to things than that.

For me there is clearly something more than just the spirit of rivalry/jealousy at work in their hearts. There is more than just a desire *to bring the boy from town down a peg or two*.

I suspect that underlying the people's attitude in regard to the man Jesus, whom they knew so well, was a difficulty on their behalf to believe in their own worth, a failure to respect the value of their own humanity.

I see the attitude of the people of Nazareth as betraying their difficulty (and even their refusal) to accept that God could work in and through an ordinary man: in and through someone just like themselves.

It is hard for many of us to credit that God can work in and through a person comparable to our self. We so underestimate the value of the human condition!

I suspect that many of us are not so very different to the people of Nazareth spoken of in today's gospel passage.

Let us have the courage and honesty to admit that we often struggle with the idea of God choosing to speak and work through ordinary people.

Do we readily admit to and accept the fact that God uses people of our own rank and origin, and that it is through them that He chooses to reach out to today's world with His message of life?

Do we not sometimes surprise ourselves thinking along these lines: *Who does he take himself to be, or who does she take herself to be, to dare to speak in God's name? Sure I know that one!*

I have heard people say to me that they would not take communion from an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist in their parish because there was nothing extraordinary about them!

Think about that.

A person made in the image and likeness of God, animated by God's very own breath of life, is somehow not deemed worthy and regarded as unacceptable, to distribute Holy Communion!

I have heard it said: *But, sure, I know them. They are just ordinary people. They shouldn't have such a role.*

We can be aware of people's deficiencies. We can think of and readily pinpoint their faults, flaws and limitations. And, because they are not perfect in our eyes, we can write them off completely. Now, think of that.

We can write off what God has loved into being and holds in being!

If it is true that we can have great difficulty accepting that God speaks and works miracles through the ordinary people around us, is it not also true that we can have difficulty with the idea that God might want to speak and work in and through the ordinary person we are?

The very ordinary man Jesus of Nazareth was quite a challenge to the people of His day.

What was the case in biblical times is still the case in many instances today.

Jesus has always been something of a scandal to people. He still is. This is the case especially when it comes to, so-called, religious people.

Quite often it is religious people who have greatest difficulty accepting the reality of the incarnation with all its implications, not only for understanding Jesus, but also for their own (*our* own!) self-understanding.

We can be scandalised by the idea that the Messiah could be (and, indeed, is) one of us!

There is a very beautiful little story told in various traditions which makes the point that when we dare to believe that the Messiah could be (and, indeed, is) one of us, the whole quality of our life changes and our way of relating to each other is transformed, enhanced, made so much better and fruitful.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. There were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. He went on to say that he was experiencing much the same thing in his synagogue.

The abbot insisted: "Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving --it was something cryptic-- was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery?

They went through the list and wondered which one of their brothers the Messiah could be. Each one asked himself if it could even be him. Here each one concluded: Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

As a result of this new way of looking at others and each one at himself, within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant centre of light and spirituality in the realm.

The point of the story is that we are all anointed by God.
If only we lived that way!

A prophet is one on whom God's Spirit has been poured forth so that he or she may speak in the Lord's name and act in His power, bearing witness to Him in word and deed.

We could say that throughout most of the Old Testament and indeed right up until Pentecost the Holy Spirit was seen to have been poured out only upon special individuals, on special occasions, for special purposes.

Among the Old Testament prophets there was one who was given a word from God which we

believe to have found fulfilment in Christ through the Pentecost event. Through the prophet Joel this promise was made: *I will pour out my spirit on all people!*

What does that mean?

Does it not mean that it is not just on some special individuals, but upon all of God's people (and, among them, ourselves) that the Spirit is now poured forth?

Does it not mean that it is all His people that the Lord wants to bless and use as channels of His blessing to others? (That surely must include us.)

It is clearly not just some small elite, not just some chosen few, not just a few designated leaders or some special caste or distinguished category among the people who are mandated to live a prophetic ministry in the Church, but all of us!

St Paul is forthright in reminding us that there is no distinction between male and female, old and young, masters and slaves, in Christ.

Every baptised person is anointed prophet, priest and king, called to share thus in Jesus' messianic mission.

The apostle Peter makes this point in his famous Pentecost sermon in chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles. The Spirit has been given to all who believe.

With the outpouring of the Spirit we are all prophets.

We have all been given a word of God to speak into people's lives.

We have all been confided the prophetic mission of making the Lord present to people.

The point to grasp from today's gospel passage is that God chooses to speak to the world through people like us, through the man or woman from down the street, as it were, through the very people sitting beside you in the benches this morning, through your spouse, your children, your work colleagues, your neighbours and your friends.

And He chooses to speak to others through each one of us!

The latter recognition can be even more of a challenge to us than the former.

Imagine God choosing to speak through you and me!

Let us allow Him to do so, for we have each been anointed a prophet of the Lord Most High!

Amen!