

The Gift of our Priests - 15th Sunday - Year B

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark: (Mk. 6: 7-13)

Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out in pairs giving them authority over the unclean spirits. And he instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff, no bread, no haversack, no coppers for their purses. They were to wear sandals but, he added, "Do not take a spare tunic." And he said to them, "If you enter a house anywhere, stay there until you leave the district. And if any place does not welcome you and people refuse to listen to you, as you walk away shake off the dust from under your feet as a sign to them."

So they set off to preach repentance; and they cast out many devils and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Dear God's family,

Prophets are God's messengers. The first reading of today is taken from one of those twelve *minor prophets*, Prophet Amos.

When Amos spoke the people got very upset and told him: *Go away, seer, go back to the land of Judah; earn your bread there, do your prophesying there.* Why such anger? Why does he want Amos out from Bethel?

Let me explain briefly the circumstances in which Amos lived to answer this question.

At the death of King Solomon, his kingdom was divided into two: only two tribes remained faithful to Solomon's son, Rehoboam, while the other ten tribes formed a separate kingdom. (i) The *kingdom of Judah* (two tribes) had *Jerusalem* as capital. (ii) The *kingdom of Israel* (ten tribes) built a new capital, *Samaria*. For most of the time, the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah were at loggerheads with each other, when not engaged in open war.

For some time, Jerusalem continued to be the centre of worship for the people of both kingdoms, but soon, the king of Israel feared that if his subjects continued to go up to worship at the Temple of Jerusalem, the two Kingdoms might eventually become one under the king of Judah and he would lose his throne. To prevent this, he built a temple at a place called "*Bethel*" for his subjects to worship there.

The word "*Bethel*" means "*God's house.*" It had been a sacred place for the Israelites since ancient times. Abraham had worshipped there on reaching the land promised him by God (Gen. 12: 8). So had Jacob when running away from his brother Esau (Gen. 28: 18), and again on his way back home with his family, after making peace with his brother (Gen. 35: 3.6-7).

Bethel therefore, became the royal sanctuary, that is, the official place of worship for the ten northern tribes. Priests employed in the temple were maintained at the king's expense. Amaziah was one of those. Besides the priests, there were the so-called "*brotherhoods of prophets.*" These too lived around the temple or roamed about the countryside earning their livelihood out of religion, claiming to speak in God's name.

Most of them were false prophets, no better than the fortune-tellers we see going around from place to place among us.

- God chose Amos from the kingdom of Judah, and sent him to preach to the kingdom of Israel. Obedient to God, Amos did not hesitate to go and preach right at Bethel, the royal sanctuary. His task was very difficult (for two reasons):

- First, he was an outsider; he came from the kingdom of Judah.
- Second, at that time, Israel was very prosperous, and therefore neither leaders nor people were willing to listen to a prophet who announced in the name of Yahweh calamities about to come. The ones who objected to Amos' preaching most were the priests of Bethel, who being maintained by the king, had their livelihood assured.

Amos, inspired by God, gave a fitting reply to Amaziah; its content is as follows: *I did not come here to earn my food by preaching; had not Yahweh called me and ordered me to preach to you I would have never come, What I preach, unpleasant though it is, is truly God's message.*

You may wonder why I should go into so much detail to explain the first reading of this Sunday. I have done so because it will help us to understand an important lesson contained in the Gospel, which reads:

Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out in pairs giving them authority over the unclean spirits. And he instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff, no bread, no haversack, no coppers for their purses. They were to wear sandals but, he added, "do not take a spare tunic."

Yes! Jesus had chosen his twelve apostles personally, one by one, from among the many disciples following him. The twelve apostles were to continue his work in the world after he would go back to his Father.

Jesus went on patiently training them day after day. After some time in his company, he decided to send them on a "preaching tour" from village to village. To enable them announce the Good News effectively, he granted them some miraculous powers. The preaching tour was meant to help them gather experience for their future mission. On sending them, Jesus insisted on three main things:

1. They were to announce that *the Kingdom of God had already come*; that is, to invite everyone to abandon sin and to put themselves under the loving rule of God.
2. In their preaching, *they should not rely on human means*, on human power, on wealth and so on. Enough for them to know that they were being sent by him, their master, who *would* closely follow their work even from afar; that is why he was putting at their disposal some of his own divine power.
3. *They were to take particular care of the sick*. Healing their diseases was to be a sign that God wanted their spiritual maladies healed as well. It was for that purpose that his Father had sent him into the world.

These instructions of Jesus to his apostles contain precious lessons for the preachers of all times. In our country and most of the world, the main-stream media and the social media are highlighting the many weaknesses of our priests, nuns and preachers.

While this is a fact, still we need to remember that the message is also for those whom God wants evangelised through them. We need to learn the following:

- a. *It is God who chooses the announcers of his Gospel: He chose Amos, a shepherd, a man who in all probability did not know how to read and write. He chose the apostles, simple fishermen without education.*

That is, he chose neither the rich nor the wise to be his messengers. His purpose in so doing was that his wisdom and power might shine in carrying out his work through people who in the eyes of men were of little worth.

Priesthood is a call and the Church is the one who recognises that call. So no one should demand: I want to be a priest and this is how I shall live it! Then he would be a false prophet.

- b. *Secondly: A man does not and should not become a preacher to earn his livelihood: Surely, priests, catechists and all those engaged in preaching the Gospel must have the necessities of life just as any, person does; those for whom they work should provide them with what they need. Jesus himself said: “the workman deserves his keep (Mt. 10:10).*

It is a very sad thing when money becomes the reason for ministry. When someone is carrying out his work of preaching the Gospel for the sake of money, he would rightly deserve the titles “*mercenary*”, “*paid shepherd*”, “*false prophet.*”

- c. *Preachers of the Gospel must have a special love for the sick: We saw this done by the first missionaries when visiting our villages; their first visit was to the sick. The missionary is not a doctor, but puts in whatever knowledge he has at the service of the sick.*

3. Preachers of the Gospel must be listened to because they are God’s messengers:

This is a lesson we must bear in mind at all times, particularly if preachers of the Gospel among us are people who come from regions other than our own. The lesson of prophet Amos makes our point clear.

- a. *It is immaterial where God’s messenger comes from; what matters is that it is God who sends him: We long and pray for the day when there are many priests from our own communities to look after the spiritual needs of our people. However our Church is ‘Catholic’. So our priests also must go as missionaries and we should keep welcoming whomsoever God sends us irrespective of their provenance.*

Our own children should move out as missionaries to other nations, and thanks to the Spirit of God today there are many from Kenya working in other countries as missionaries. What would we say if our children were considered “*outsiders*” there and rejected on that account?

- b. *God’s messengers are subject to human weakness just as we are; this however should not prevent us from accepting their message: People engaged in preaching the Gospel should strive to copy Christ in their lives. Yet, in spite of their best efforts, they continue to be people subject to human weakness and even to sin.*

For their apparent or real failures, should we reject him? Throw him out of the community?

No we shouldn't do that. The fact that one is not so morally pleasing, should not however prevent us from accepting the message they communicate to us in God's name. When we drink water from a tap, we do not stop to consider the shape of the tap or the material out of which it is made, whether iron or gold. What matters is that the water flowing from it be good, pure, uncontaminated water.

If worse comes to worse, we should follow the advice of Jesus in the Gospel: *“Do what they tell you and listen to what they say; but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practice what they preach”* (Mt 23:3).

We could go on for a long time explaining what our behaviour towards our Bishop, priests and catechists should be. The following words of Jesus in the Gospel are the best conclusion to our explanation *“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me; and those who welcome me welcome the one who sent me”* (Mt. 10:40).

Precious and practical too is the advice of Paul to his Christians of Thessalonica: *“We appeal to you, my brothers, to be considerate to those who are working among you and are above you in the Lord as your teachers. Have the greatest respect and affection for them because of their work”* (1 Thess. 5: 12-13).

4. We must thank God for the gift of faith and for those whom he sent to bring it to us:

The second reading of this Sunday is taken from the beginning of Paul's letter to his Christians of Ephesus. It is a beautiful hymn of thanksgiving to God:

- for having sent his Son Jesus into the world to bring to mankind the Good News of salvation.
- for having cleansed us of our sins at Baptism.
- for the gift of the Holy Spirit by which we were made God's children.
- for having destined us to share in full God's life and joy in heaven.

To all these motives for thanksgiving, we should add another: *for having sent his messengers, our missionaries, our priests, nuns, catechists to enable us share in those treasures.*

We shall always need God's messengers to guide us, so that God's gifts may yield fruit in us and be completed one day with the gift of Heaven.

We must be grateful to the preachers of the Gospel among us: the best way to express our gratitude is to help them to be at all times what God wants them to be, truly faithful and dedicated to him; if they are not, we shall be the sufferers.

So let us pray: Father in heaven, we thank you for having sent your Son Jesus to bring us the Good News that you want us saved. We thank you for the preachers of the Gospel you keep on sending us. Unworthy though we are, raise up from among our won children faithful messengers of the Gospel and help us to give an attentive ear to your Word. We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.