

## God's grace suffices for prophets

**Fourteenth Sunday of the Year** – Cycle B – July 4, 2021

**Readings:** Ezek 2:2-5; 2 Cor 12:7-10; Mk 6:1-6

*“Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown”* (Mk 6:4)

Prologue: Prophets in the Bible are called to be God's voice—announcing good news, denouncing sin and evil. Though their times and circumstances differ, we have three prophets—Ezekiel, Jesus, Paul—who face rejection, insults and persecutions. Yet, convinced that they speak on behalf of God, they continue their uphill task of calling the wayward to walk in God's ways. Despite their weaknesses and rejection from people, God's grace is sufficient and sustains prophets.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Ezekiel is one of the four major prophets of the First Testament called to be the voice of God from 593 BC to 571 BC, a most trying time in Israelite history. God chooses him to prophesy to his people enduring the Babylonian Exile four years after he himself was carried off there along with King Jehoiakim by the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. Ezekiel warns the people that they have brought destruction upon themselves due to their infidelity to God. Moreover, Jerusalem and its temple, which had been desecrated by unworthy priests, would be destroyed and God's people would lose their sense of identity and community. They would become slaves. All that Ezekiel, and Jeremiah too, foretold came true. In the latter half of his ministry, Ezekiel would console his people, assuring them that God would eventually restore them in their homeland with a new Jerusalem and new temple. Today's first reading highlights the first of the four different accounts of Ezekiel's call. He becomes aware that God's Spirit “entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me” (v.2). God tells him, “I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me” (v.3). The people of Israel are accused of being “impudent and stubborn” (v.4), because they have “rebelled against me” [God] and “transgressed” God's laws. Furthermore, Yahweh warns Ezekiel that his own people might reject him. Nonetheless, “Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.” (v.5). Though rejected, he would be recognized as a true prophet.
2. In line with a long tradition of prophets who were rejected mainly because God's message was challenging and demanded personal conversion, Jesus, God's Prophet par excellence, suffers rejection too. However, compared to the other prophets, his message is absolutely authoritative since he not only *speaks* God's word but *is* God's Word (Jn 1:14). In Jesus, words become flesh in works; his miracles are the fruit of ‘*who*’ he really *is*, deep within. So, there is a continuity-in-discontinuity from the OT prophetism to the NT prophetism fulfilled in Jesus. While the OT prophets said, “Thus says the Lord ...” pointing to God's authority, Jesus says, “You have heard it said .... but *I say to you* ...” (Mt 5:21-22; 27-28; 31-34; 38-39). He speaks with the authority of being Son of God. Today's gospel passage focuses on the rejection that Jesus faces in his hometown. In the gospel of Mark, the opposition to Jesus and his ministry is already building up from 2:1 – 3:6 with “The Pharisees ... conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (3:6). Moreover, his own kith and kin were worried about him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind” (3:21). Why did they reject him despite being firsthand witnesses of his wisdom and the wonders he worked? The answer seems to lie in a ‘double-amazement’: of Jesus and of his people.

3. Listening to Jesus in the synagogue on the sabbath, “many who heard him were *astounded*. They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!’” (v.5). Having seen, heard and experienced his “wisdom” (words) and “deeds of power” (works), they should’ve realized that he was pointing beyond himself to Abba-God and was inviting them to go within themselves to discover that same God of Life. Jesus was calling his people to go deeper, higher and further. However, they preferred to remain at the surface level with their stereotyped ideas of ‘*who*’ should be doing ‘*what*’. Thus, they clip his wings and chisel him down to size, calling him “the carpenter” and “son of Mary” (v.3). By so doing, they shut out their own possibilities of being active partners in ushering in God’s Reign. Jesus too “was amazed at their unbelief” (v.6) because his people were so closed to God’s Spirit within them that they failed to carry forward God’s work among them. Indeed, in rejecting Jesus, they were throwing out the baby with the bathwater, so to say. Thus, “he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them” (v.5). God does not force us to cooperate with God’s will. God only invites. God leaves us free to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.

### **Linking the Psalm and Second Reading to the Theme**

- The responsorial psalm (123) is a poignant plea for help in times of trial and tribulation: “Our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us” (v.2). A representative of Israel pleads on behalf of the community with images of servant and master, maid and mistress symbolizing Israel’s relationship with Yahweh. The last stanza seems to echo the pains of the prophet whose “soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud” (v.4).
- Paul is certainly one of Jesus’ most zealous apostles. He is a prophet too. Today’s passage is from the so-called ‘tearful letter’ (2 Cor 10–13) where Paul bemoans the presence of ‘false prophets’ who criticize him and boast about their achievements, ecstasies and miracles. By contrast, he confesses that, whenever he is tempted to boast like his opponents, he becomes aware of what he terms “thorn in the flesh” (v.7). Scholars hypothesize that “thorn in the flesh” either refers to epilepsy or some form of depression. That notwithstanding, what’s important is that Paul deeply experiences God’s reassuring voice: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (v.9). Thus, Paul is content with weaknesses, mistreatment, persecutions and difficulties, “for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (v.10).

Pope Francis’ *Apostolic Letter to Consecrated People on the Year of Consecrated Life* (2014): “I am counting on you ‘to wake up the world’, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. .... Religious follow the Lord in a special way, a prophetic way.... Prophets know God and know the wo/men who are their brethren. They are able to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice. Because they are free, they are bound to no one but God, and they have no interest other than God. Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God is on their side.”

**Point to Ponder:** We are called to be priests, pastors and prophets. We have many priests; and many pastors, too. But perchance are there too few prophets among us?

**In Lighter Vein:** A little fish swimming in the Ocean said to another older fish, “Since you’re more experienced than I am, tell me, where can I find the Ocean? I’m tired of searching and not finding it.” Astounded at the ignorance of the little fish, the older one said, “The Ocean is what you’re swimming in now!” Said the little fish sadly, “No! This is only water; I must search elsewhere.” While ‘sinners’ were touched by the re-creator of the world, those closed to the power of God saw only a carpenter.

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