

Walking with the Lord with staff and sandals

Fifteenth Sunday of the Year – Cycle B – July 11, 2021

Readings: Amos 7:12-15; Eph 1:3-14; Mk 6:7-13

“He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff” (Mk 6:8)

Prologue: The first and third readings of today focus on God’s mission entrusted to disciples: Amos and the Twelve, respectively. They are faced with the possibility of rejection of their mission. Yet, their only security is God and their surety is God’s word. The image of the *staff* symbolizes the disposition required of disciples: to travel light, knowing that they are pilgrims and prophets, always on the move, for that is the core of their mission—to spread God’s word far and wide.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Today’s first reading echoes last Sunday’s theme of the rejection faced by prophets. Prophet Amos prophesized during the reigns of King Uzziah (c. 783–742 BC) of Judah (southern kingdom) and King Jeroboam II (c. 786–746 BC) of Israel, the northern kingdom. He critiqued corruption, social injustices and religious abuses, stressing that worship without a morally good life was worthless. Moreover, he asserted God’s sovereignty over humankind, predicted the destruction of Israel and Judah, and foretold the murder of Jeroboam. His prophetic utterances were unacceptable to the priests of the northern shrine at Bethel, who sought to please the king and protect the status quo. God’s prophet Amos and Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, stand as symbols of contradiction. Amaziah seeks to flatter and butter the king and his ‘civil religion’— at Bethel, “for it is the king’s sanctuary, and a temple of the kingdom” (v.13). By contrast, Amos speaks God’s word truthfully and denounces all that is evil, unjust and inhuman. For this, Amaziah warns him, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel” (vv.12-13a). The “*seer*” title here is probably sarcastic; for, in our modern idiom, Amaziah is plainly saying, “Get lost! Go back home!” As response, Amos explains that he is “neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son ... but a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees,” and is prophesying simply because, “the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” (v.15). History is full of examples of the perennial conflict between prophet and priest, apostle and administrator, missionary and manager. While the prophet, apostle and missionary are always ‘on the move’ in the power of the Spirit, priests, administrators and managers often tend to uphold the status quo, butter the boss, pamper the flock, seek comforts in institutions, and officiate at ceremonies.
2. In today’s gospel Jesus calls his twelve disciples to share in his mission. He had earlier appointed these twelve, “to be with him, and *to be sent out* to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons” (Mk 3:14-15). Having spent some time with him as disciples, the time is now ripe for the twelve to go forth as apostles—taking an active part in Jesus’ ministry. In short, the twelve are to be teachers and healers: missionaries on the move. And, if they are to be ‘on the move’ then they must travel light, unencumbered by baggage. Jesus “ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; *no bread, no bag, no money in their belts*” (v.8). Interestingly, the only two requirements for missionary work are concerned with the feet; not stomach (bread), nor body (clothes), nor security (money). The ‘staff’ was widely used in the ancient biblical world by travellers, symbolic of a transitory lifestyle and the vulnerability of living on the road. For instance, to signify his identity as a wanderer, Jacob says, “with

only my *staff* I crossed this Jordan” (Gen 32:10) and in a hurry to escape from their slavery, the Israelites are instructed to eat the Passover meal with, “your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your *staff* in your hand” (Ex 12:11). Without making any provision for food and clothing, the disciples are to totally trust God’s providence.

3. Jesus’ commissioning of the twelve to do what he did must be seen in the light of his combating the power of Satan and evil. In Palestine of Jesus’ time, medical knowledge was limited. What we might nowadays attribute to mental illnesses, big or small, would be diagnosed as demonic possession and harassment by evil spirits. Thus, in the birthing of God’s kingdom in the person of Jesus, all forms of Satan’s power are being destroyed forever. Jesus is also aware that his disciples’ message might be rejected by people (as we saw in last Sunday’s gospel passage). Hence, he instructs his disciples: “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them” (v.11). This is symbolic action that was done by Jews as they crossed over from pagan territory into holy Palestine. The message that the disciples give to people is one of repentance. By way of cures, they do two things: (a) drive out demons; and, (b) heal the sick with an anointing with oil. Curing people with oil was fairly common in ancient Palestine. The church would see this as a prefiguring of the sacrament of ‘extreme unction’ or anointing of the sick as expressed in James 5:14.

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme: Paul preached to the people of Ephesus between 54 and 57 AD. He was very successful there and many people were baptized. Paul reminds the converts that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved [Christ]” (vv.4-6). This choice, call and consecration to be holy is an unmerited gift. Moreover, we Christians have received “the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” (v.13) that empowers us to lead good lives. It’s important to remember that ‘Christian’ precisely means ‘anointed one’. We are ‘anointed ones’ in The Anointed One, Jesus! This ought to keep us fearless and faithful in the face of trials, persecutions and rejection by people.

Three Current Concerns:

The Prophetic Concern: We have witnessed the death of 84-year-old Jesuit priest, Stan Swamy, who raised his voice against the exploitation of Adivasis (tribals) by the rich and the powerful. He was threatened and imprisoned for almost ten months. He did not succumb to political pressure but sacrificed his life for his people. Am I ready for this?

The Institutional Concern: Indian Christianity is, by and large, institutional. We boast about our medical ministry catering to large masses of people. However, instead of walking light with the Lord with only a *‘staff’* we seem to be ‘overstaffed’ and overburdened with big buildings, large tracts of land and lots of money. Can we do more with less?

The Christian Concern: Are we aware of our anointing with God’s Spirit in our mission? Pope Francis reminds us that every Christian is called to be a ‘missionary disciple’.

Point to Ponder: When the philosopher Diogenes was seen eating lentils for supper, his colleague Aristippus who lived comfortably by flattering the king said, “If you’d learn to be subservient to the king you wouldn’t have to eat only lentils.” Diogenes replied, “If you had learnt to live on lentils, you wouldn’t have to flatter the king!” Who would you prefer to emulate—Amos and Diogenes? Or Amaziah and Aristippus? The choice is yours, and mine.
