

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Fr. Samuel Springuel

10 September, 2023

1st Reading Ezekiel 33:7-9

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 95:1-2,6-7,8-9

2nd Reading Romans 13:8-10

Gospel Matthew 18:15-20

Being a prophet in our two-faced time is hard. On the one hand, there are plenty of people out there who are eager to claim the mantle of prophet. These people live in the utter confidence of their own rightness. They never question themselves, utterly assured that what they think is right. On the other hand, there are also lots of people out there who deride prophets as out of touch. They preach the supreme value of tolerance, by which they usually mean that all beliefs are equally valid. To them, the prophet tries to impose his beliefs on others and is thus the height of narcissism or even bigotry.

People in the first group aren't much fun to be around. They tend to be very insistent about getting their own way, which of course is the "right way" to do whatever it is they are talking about. In their mouths the phrase "your opinion" becomes an insult, as in "Well that's just your opinion," or "I suppose you are entitled to your opinion." Conversations with this sort of person rapidly become an exercise in walking on eggshells lest you set them off and feel the brunt of their disdain or anger (depending on their personality). Once they've declared what the "right answer" is to any question, disagree with them at your own risk, because they will find a way to make you regret it.

Of course, the second group isn't much better. While you won't get your head bitten off, or be given a guilt trip long enough to rival the Nile river, simply for having an opinion different from theirs, it's another story entirely if you try to make a claim for Truth. To these supreme evangelists of tolerance, you can have "your truth," I can have "my truth," and they can have "their truth," but there can be no Truth, with a capital "T." Sure, there may be facts (and I must stress the "may" in that statement), meaning innocuous observations of the way things are, but worldviews that attempt to tie those facts together into a narrative whole, those are inherently subjective and claims of Truth for a particular worldview are naive at best, bigoted at worst.

As Christians, we are called to be prophets. In our baptism we were made partakers of Jesus's threefold mission: priest, *prophet*, and king. And today's readings are instructive in how to be a Christian prophet. Ezekiel was called to be a prophet, to proclaim God's word. This was a tough word for people to hear, one Ezekiel was tempted to hide for the sake of social niceties, and so God has to be explicit and tell him that if he hides it, then he will be responsible for the consequences that result from people not listening to the word. That same

admonition applies to us: if we hide God's word, we will be held responsible for those who fail to listen to it because it will be our fault that they didn't hear it. This might seem like it forces us to be part of the first group, those who are confident in their own rightness, but I think Jesus's teaching on how we proclaim that word puts lie to that proposition.

Jesus's teaching on incremental correction is many-faceted. The most obvious facet, and the one we usually focus on, is its gentleness to the sinner. By approaching our offending brother in private first, we give them the opportunity to save face. They have the opportunity to fix their wrong behavior without becoming a public spectacle. It is only when they refuse to listen that Jesus instructs us to steadily bring in more and more people, widening the group that says there is a problem that must be fixed. And even if it becomes necessary to go all the way, we must remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. He didn't ostracize them, abuse them, or ignore them. He talked with them. He ate with them. He was always clear about what they needed to do to be reconciled to God, but he always held open the door to that reconciliation too. Jesus loved the sinner so much that he would go to where they were in order to guide them to where they ought to be. As prophets in the mold of Jesus, we are called to do the same.

Another facet to Jesus's teaching is its gentleness to the prophet. While Jesus knew the word of God, because he was the Word of God, we are not so privileged. Our knowledge of the word of God is incomplete, limited by our human nature, our experiences. If we are honest with ourselves, we can never say, 100%, that we know the word of God that needs to be spoken in a particular situation. Because of this, we, like Ezekiel, can be tempted to not say anything at all. After all, we wouldn't want to fall into the trap that so many of the false prophets of the Old Testament fell into and proclaim as the word of God something which is merely the word of man, our word. The gentleness to the prophet of Jesus's teaching on how to speak the word of God provides a remedy for this. The prophet is not obligated to speak the word to everyone right away, but merely to the person whom they believe to be in the wrong. Just as the potential sinner is given the opportunity to correct their behavior in private, so too the potential prophet is given the opportunity to learn more about the word of God in private. This requires the prophet to approach the situation with an open mind, without pre-judgement and with a willingness to listen to the person the believe needs to be corrected. In short, to approach them in love, and not anger or condemnation. Further, if the next step of bringing in one or two others is needed, these others can be given a chance to weigh in on their understanding of the word of God in this situation. The prophet need not be responsible for speaking the word of God alone, but becomes a co-prophet whose understanding of the word of God is enriched by those who speak with him. And finally, the prophet is not asked to go on TV and make a public statement, but to bring in the Church, to submit themselves to the institution that Jesus established for the safeguarding of his teaching. And while we know the unfortunate truth that the institutional Church, being made up of flawed human beings, can fail in its duty in this regard, the prophet who does this well will come to a deeper, more profound understanding of the word of God that they have been called to proclaim.

Indeed, I would argue that this facet of Jesus's teaching demonstrates the true meaning of tolerance: an openness to the truth that others might have that I do not. We are all flawed human beings, and while Truth, with a capital

“T,” does exist, it is defined by God, not us. We only ever possess a partial understanding of the Truth. If we are lucky that partial understanding might be perfectly applicable in a particular situation, but most of the time we don’t even know enough about the situation to declare definitively how applicable our partial understanding of the Truth is. Someone else, who knows more about, or simply a different aspect of, the situation might have more of the Truth as it applies than we do. True tolerance means being accepting of the fact that we don’t know everything and what we do know may not be applicable. We are always in search of the Truth, not its possessors.

Being a prophet in our two-faced time is challenging. While the purveyors of self-confidence might try to claim the mantle of prophet and the purveyors of tolerance denigrate it, neither really understands what it means to be a true prophet. For that we must look to Christ, the Prophet par excellence.