

14th Sunday; Cycle B

(Ezek 2:25; 2Cor12:7-10; Mark 6:16)

Today's readings obviously direct us to prophecy and prophets. We have the call of Ezekiel in the 1st reading and Jesus' is a prophet without honor in the gospel.

The starting place for prophecy, of course is the OT. There we find that the call to prophecy is peremptory, inescapable. Amos tells us, "The Lord took me from following the flock and said, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel." Jeremiah objected, "I'm only a youth" (which I translate for my classes, "I'm only a sophomore"). Imagine the Lord saying to You, or you, or you, "Go, stand before the Senate Office building, the Supreme Court, the White House, and proclaim this message." Do you think you could escape the call? Jonah thought he could. The word of the Lord comes, "Go to Nineveh, and preach against it." Nineveh is far to the east, but Jonah gets on a boat sailing as far west as he can go. We know the story: the Lord sends a storm, Jonah ends up in the sea and is swallowed by a great fish and has three days in the fish's belly to think things over; then he is vomited up on the shore. When the word of the Lord comes to him a second time, "Go to Nineveh, that great city," he knows he has no choice.

The prophets were, of course, very concerned about Israel's fidelity to the Lord, worshiping Him alone, but most of their words, their wrath, their condemnations, were

directed against those guilty of neglect or oppression of the needy--the poor, the helpless, the widow and orphan, the alien, the foreigner living among them. Amos excoriates those who "trample the heads of the destitute into the dust of the earth, and force the lowly out of the way" (2:7).

"Woe to those who turn justice into wormword and cast righteousness to the ground ... oppressing the just ... turning away the needy" (5:7-12). To the wealthy women, "Hear this word, you ... who oppress the destitute and abuse the needy" (4:1). Isaiah accuses the leaders of passing laws aimed at enriching themselves at the expense of the poor: "Woe to those who enact unjust statutes, who write oppressive decrees, depriving the needy of judgment, robbing my people's poor of justice, making widows their plunder and orphans their prey" (10:1-2).

This is the biblical option for the poor.

The Israelite concept of justice (*sedaqah*) is not impersonal, objective, like ours, but a quality that inclined toward mercy and generosity; it was the very fabric of society itself. We see what happens when that fabric is rotten. As the prophets threatened, the result was the downfall of the nation. Our readings at Mass last week illustrate the outcome: Jerusalem was destroyed and the people led into captivity in Babylon. It could happen again.

In today's gospel we see Jesus as a prophet. The disciples on the road to Emmaus referred to Him as "a

prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people." And in fact He acted in every way as the prophets of old, not sparing the "woes": "woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented in sackcloth and ashes" (Matt 11:21) He excoriated the rulers and rich for their greed, mistreatment of the poor, and hypocrisy. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites," He accuses them of devouring the houses of widows on the pretext of offering lengthy prayers. Like Isaiah condemning those who passed laws enabling them to defraud widows and orphans, Jesus condemns them for their "tradition" which allowed a son to dedicate his wealth to the Temple and so to be dispensed from caring for his parents.

Jesus loved the poor. In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied...But woe to you who are rich, for you have your consolation. .. woe to you who are filled now, for you will be hungry" (Luke 6:20-21,24-25). Our Lady's Magnificat says: "He has pulled down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, the rich he has sent empty away.@ God=s option for the poor.

Some think of the OT as judgment, the NT as love,

but that is false. The OT is full of love and blessing, while the NT can be more threatening. There we read: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!" (Heb 10:31).

Jesus can speak without "woes@ and deliver the message in even more fearful terms. That description of the last judgment, the sheep and the goats: those who do not recognize Jesus in the sisters and brothers in need and do not feed, clothe, and comfort them are among the goats and "these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matt 25:31-46)

If Amos were to come back to us now, what would he say? What would Jesus say? Our option is for the rich. The disparity between rich and poor has never been greater. Billionaires reap billions, while according to the census bureau, 42 million people, between 12% and 14% of the population, live in poverty--this in richest country on earth. St. Paul reminded us last week that "our Lord Jesus Christ for your sake became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich." His collection for the poor church in Jerusalem is not to burden the Corinthians, but, he says, "as a matter of equality, your surplus at the present should supply their needs, so that their surplus may also supply your needs, that there may be equality" (2 Cor 8:9-14). "Equality." Yet if we tax the surplus of the wealthy to help feed the poor, they cry "socialism." We

have military parades at the cost of 30 million, but begrudge money for food stamps program intended to feed the poorest of the poor to ward off starvation.

God, not we, OWNS the whole earth and has made us landlords of this great, broad, fertile land. Are we unwilling to share it with those fleeing terror and starvation?

What would Amos say? Jesus say? "Woe to all you, whoever you may be, who tear infants and toddlers from their mothers' arms in order to keep others out. You will have your reward!"

Perhaps we can do little directly, but we still have recourse. We can take seriously Our Lord's injunction that in dealing with our sisters and brothers, what ever their social condition, their gender, their race, their ethnic background, we are dealing with Jesus, make possible again the admiration of pagans, who said long ago, "See how these Christians love one another!"

Jesus teaching is sure. Remember the parable of the leaven, the leaven which permeates the whole mass. That leaven is the gospel, the gospel of love. Love is contagious. It can change the whole world. Let=s give it a try.