

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

In today's first reading we are introduced to one of the great characters of the Old Testament, a layman called Amos, farmer turned prophet. Amos came from a small village in the hill country of Judah, about five miles southeast of Bethlehem. He experienced a call from God – what form that took we do not know. All we know is that the experience wrenched him away from his work on the land, impelling him to work as a prophet in another country. Amos was a simple man, but he was no simpleton or redneck. He was a critical observer of the social and religious scene, the first prophet to commit his work to writing, a telling communicator who knew how to proclaim his message with biting clarity.

The time was around the middle of the eighth century BC. Amos was sent to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, which had reached the summit of its material power and prosperity. The land was full of plenty, the cities were elegantly built, the palaces were strongly defended and the rich had their summer and winter villas adorned in costly ivory. At the same time there was widespread corruption and immorality. The poor were afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery. There was an absence of justice and pity: the judges were corrupt, the innocents were betrayed.

In the midst of all this luxury and misery, religion flourished. People thronged to the shrines at festival time to practice elaborate ritual. Amos regarded the religious services as a counterfeit enterprise abhorrent to God. So he spoke the word of God:

*I hate and despise your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals.
I reject your offerings and refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened cattle.
Let me have no more of the din of your chanting....
But let justice flow like water, and integrity like an unfailing stream. (5:21-24)*

So it was that the outsider Amos used his talent for disturbing the peace. He went to the shrine of Bethel, which was the sanctuary of the king, a chapel royal. There he came face to face with Amaziah, the priest of Bethel. Amaziah was exasperated by the preaching of Amos and accused him of being disloyal – an old trick to discredit the prophet who opposes the status quo.....one which is used pretty frequently even today!

In today's reading Amaziah the priest tells Amos the prophet to go home and leave the royal sanctuary in peace. Amos replies with the story of his own experience. He has never belonged to the official prophets' union. He was a shepherd; **now** he is God's spokesman. The single cause of this radical change was a compelling event: "The Lord took me." To Amaziah's command: "Go home", Amos rejoins with **God's** command: "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."

Amos states simply that he did not become a prophet by self-appointment or by royal appointment; he was conscripted by God for the declared purpose of announcing his message. Therefore he is not torn between two competing loyalties: his loyalty to the word of God has clear priority over any other loyalty in his life. Echoes of St Thomas More..... "I am the King's good servant, but God's first."

In today's Gospel Jesus summons the twelve apostles and sends them out on a missionary tour. Like the prophet Amos, the chosen followers of Jesus have to carry the word of God as a challenge to others. In that mission the apostles have the authority and the power of Jesus. They have to travel on that.

So, they are not to rely on their own resources but on the authority that has been given to them and the hospitality that will be offered them. With no bread and no money, they have to depend on the kindness of others: *that vulnerability makes their message their real resource*. If they are made welcome, it means that people are not only hospitable to them, but also to the word they preach. If they are not accepted, they have no option but to move on. And when a town rejects their message, the apostles are to shake the dust from their feet – a symbolic act performed by strict Jews returning to Palestine after journeying abroad.

Both the apostles and the prophets have to rely on the authority and the power given to them. In taking to the road, they will test their message on foreign soil; they will discover if their vocation can survive the official stamp of disapproval. For it is not only the message that is being tested, it is the messenger.

This process continues every day in the life of the Church and the world – every time a preacher braces himself to declare the word of God, every time a Christian goes public on the values of the Gospel, every time any man or woman takes a stand against injustice. The opportunity and the challenge will happen in the home and in the workplace. It will happen every time our Gospel values are threatened in conversation and in action. The opportunity to proclaim and live out those Gospel values will happen in big matters and small. But it will happen !