

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B - "Don't be afraid. I'll tell you what to say."
July 04, 2021.

The gift of prophecy involves speaking God's Word in a specific situation. Although prophecy is sometimes about a future event, it is *usually* a preached word or teaching that God wants his people to hear and apply to their lives in the present. In Luke 12:12 Jesus tells his disciples: ***"Do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."*** The prophet Moses received the law of God for his people so that the people could learn it and teach it to their children for daily living (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Isaiah received some prophecies that were fulfilled many years later, but God also told Isaiah to urge the people, "Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed" (Isaiah 1:16-17). These words still apply to us today.

The prophet Ezekiel was from about 593 BCE to 571 BCE. This period encompasses the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon in 587 BCE. It was a time of great turmoil for Israel. The first reading for today (Ezekiel 2:2-5) tells the story of God's commission to Ezekiel as prophet to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels. ***"You shall speak my words to them," the Lord said, "whether they hear or refuse to hear."*** And then the Lord told Ezekiel not to be afraid or dismayed. This is pretty standard stuff, in terms of what we know of the Old Testament prophets: **they are sent by God to the people of Israel to call them back to the covenant, they are ignored, forgotten, berated, mistreated, tortured, killed.** And nobody listens to them. As Jeremiah said, **"Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."** Nobody with any sense wants this job! But God says again and again, **"Don't be afraid. I'll tell you what to say."**

Then let's move forward 400 years or so to Jesus. As Christians, we have a different view of Jesus; it's hard for us to understand that to most of the people of his time he was just another prophet. And his experience was no different. In this Sunday's Gospel reading (Mark 6:1-6) he is in his hometown Nazareth, teaching in the synagogue, and no one is happy with what he has to say. **"Can anything good come out of Galilee?"** And Nazareth wasn't even the best place in Galilee to come from. It was just an obscure little town, one of about 200 such little towns in that area, inhabited by perhaps 500 peasant villagers. They knew who he was. He'd grown up there. His mother, Mary, still lived there among them, as did many of his relatives; and there were plenty of older women there who'd also had a hand in "mothering" him. And their husbands remembered how he had started early to learn his father's trade. Joseph was dead now, but there was hardly a home in Nazareth that didn't have baskets, chests, or some kind of furniture that Joseph or Jesus had made.

"Isn't this Joseph and Mary's boy? What does he know? Who does he think he is?" "Who do you think you are?" is one of the most enduring phrases from childhood. We use it to put people down, to rein people in when we think they are starting to think too highly of themselves. Everyone thought Ezekiel and the other prophets had a lot of nerve saying they spoke for God. So when Jesus got up to speak at the synagogue that Sabbath day, they weren't too surprised. He was in town visiting his mother, and it was only natural for him to get up and speak about the scriptures. But when they heard the way he spoke, they were kind of surprised. They didn't expect to hear him speak with such authority. Where was this coming from? It just wasn't possible! That day in the synagogue, the people of Nazareth had quite an opportunity. They could open their minds and hearts. They could believe that, as the angel had said to Mary years ago in that very town, nothing is impossible with God. They could accept that God was at work, right there in Nazareth, in the person of this man, Jesus, whom they knew so

well. Or they could close their minds and hearts. They could buy into the prevailing wisdom that nothing good could really come out of Galilee, and perpetuate the negativity that men and women fall into so easily when they let their fears keep them from believing.

And that's what most of them did. Mark writes that **“they took offence at him.”** They closed their minds and hearts and rejected him. And it is recorded that **“he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid hands on a few sick people and cured them.”** Surely, not everyone in Nazareth had closed their minds and their hearts. Maybe those sick folks were just desperate enough to believe. And finally, Mark says, **“he was amazed at their unbelief.”** This has to be one of the saddest sentences in the Gospel! How must Jesus have felt! These were his people, his mentors, the friends of his youth. He had played with their children, eaten at their tables, shared worship with them. He had so much to give them and share with them. But they couldn't accept him. As the saying goes, **“prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”**

We have not changed much over the centuries. Human nature being what it is, we don't care much for people who think they have a corner on the truth, or that they know “God's will”. These days, many succumb to false prophets such as politicians, Hollywood stars, or Instagram influencers. People look for God on apps like HeadSpace, in meditation closets, or exercise classes, completely missing that God revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. We let our prejudices get in the way; we expect people to fit a certain mold, to look and sound a certain way, to be of a certain social status. But all through the Bible we read of God using the least expected people to do His work. God is present in the ordinary bits and pieces of life and shows up more often than we think. He is not apart from the world, nor is he confined or controlled by religious ritual and language. We must say thanks and give honour and recognition to the prophets of God's goodness in our midst: they could be our spouse, our children, the store cashier, the neighbour, friends and even strangers who gave us their time, their support and encouragement. Do not take for granted the presence of God amongst us.

By our baptism, we are all called to be priest, prophet and king. We are modern day prophets to proclaim the Good News, to evangelize by our lives. Yes, there is no manual on how, what, when, where to do. Don't worry, the Lord will provide! When we speak of the beauty of knowing Christ to others, love demands that we first prayerfully assess their receptivity. It takes mature discernment to know what to say, how to say it, and when it will be well received. All we need is to trust and have faith in him. Just like what he has done to prophets in the Old Testament: Moses ,Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah , ... God will say,” **Don't be afraid. I'll tell you what to say”**.