

## Accepting Prophets, Accepting Ourselves

For the next four weeks, our first readings will be taken from the prophets: Ezekiel this week, Amos next week, then Jeremiah, then the prophet Elisha.

Actually, all three of our readings for this Sunday point to prophecy.

Let's start with Ezekiel. The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel comes from the beginning of the Babylonian Captivity, around 580 BC. After the people of Israel had fallen into pagan practices, trusting in military treaties with pagan neighbors rather than trusting in God, the Lord withdrew his protection. Like the Pharaoh in the days of Moses, the people became more and more obstinate, refusing to listen to Jeremiah and others. "Hard of face and obstinate of heart," the Lord calls them in today's first reading. The Hebrews ended up being conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile to what is modern day Iraq. At the beginning of this exile the people felt absolutely deserted. Some believed that they were being punished for their sins. But many others refused to believe in God any more. "If Yahweh exists, he would not have allowed this to happen," they claimed. Instead of drawing closer to God in their need, they rejected his very existence. But God gave the spirit of prophesy to one of these exiles. His name was Ezekiel. Ezekiel said that God set him on his feet. Look at that this way: God gave him standing among a downtrodden people. Some would listen to him. Some wouldn't. One thing is for sure though: they would know there was a prophet among them.

With Ezekiel and with all of the prophets, God used one of their own to speak to the people. The humble accepted this. The proud could not accept this. This destructive hubris reaches its pinnacle in those who rejected Jesus because he was one of them, all too familiar to them. His mighty deeds, his miracles, his wisdom, the power of his speaking, were lost on people who could not get beyond the fact that this was the carpenter speaking. They knew his family. They missed the words of the Greatest of All Prophets because they were too close to him.

It was a very human failure that we all have to be so careful of repeating. So often we apply the weakest philosophical argument, the ad hominem argument, as justification for not responding to truth. The ad hominem argument is an attack against the person. It basically says that because a person has this or that foible, or limitation, or even failing, we shouldn't listen to him or her no matter what he or she says. We see this on a national scale as well as regarding individuals. For example, the hatchet job that the media has done on the leaders of the Catholic Church in the wake of the clergy abuse scandals, results in some in the liberal press dismissing any statement of any bishop on any issue. They would say, "We shouldn't listen to these bishops' statements on the immorality of abortion, or gay marriage, because so many of the bishops have been shown not to be so squeaky clean themselves." That's an ad hominem argument, an attack against the person.

On the level of individuals, the ad hominem argument prevents us from

recognizing the possibility that truth can emanate from someone we know. For example, a home ownership group is meeting regarding the designs for a community center. Someone we might know who can be quite mean to people, stands up in the meeting and says, "We should design the building in such a way that all the members of our community, including those with physical challenges, should feel welcome." Do we hear the truth of the statement, or do we miss the truth because we are so focused in on the foibles of the one speaking? Or far closer to home, husbands and wives know each others' foibles and failures. So often this prevents them from hearing the truth come from their spouse. So many teens can not get beyond their parents humanity to hear the truth of their Mom and Dad's advice. So many parents cannot get beyond their teens lapses in maturity to recognize their virtues.

Perhaps the ad hominem argument is most destructive when we apply it to ourselves. So often we want to make a statement of faith, a statement of morality, but we feel that we are just not good enough to speak out. For example, someone who was raised in my generation might say, "How can I tell my children not to smoke and take drugs, when I sacrificed years of my youth to the wacky weed?" Or, "How can I emphasize to the kids the importance of receiving communion weekly, when I was away from the Church during my college days?" or, applying this to the present, "How can I protest immorality, when I have been far from saintly myself?" These are ad hominem arguments that we are using against ourselves. If we follow this line of thought than we would stifle the truth.

Saint Paul was certainly aware of his own personal failings. We hear about this in the second reading. He speaks about a thorn in the flesh. What was this? A sin he had trouble avoiding. Was his temper getting the best of him? Should he stop preaching Jesus Christ because he recognized this thorn. No, the message was more important than the person. He might be weak, but the message, the Gospel is strong. "In fact," Paul says, "Maybe this is all for the better. It is not me, but the message that is important. I am weak, but Christ is strong. In fact, I am happy to be weak if that focuses my attention on true strength, the power of the Lord."

And that is where we need to be, all of us. We all know our own personal failings and sinfulness. But we want God in our lives. We want his Kingdom of Peace and Justice to come. We need to realize that God will still speak through us despite our own foibles.

Sometimes when I recite the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass, I use the expression, "Yours is the truth that gives meaning to the very concept of truth." You have all heard me do that. The truth of the Lord comes from him, not from the one who mouths it. We err horribly when we focus in on the individual proclaiming truth, even if this individual is ourselves

The power of God is upon us. His presence is among us. His truth is in our hearts and on our lips. We need to be less demanding upon others and upon

ourselves. We pray today that we do not let our own humanity or that of any one else keep us from hearing, proclaiming and living in the Truth of the Lord.