

ORDINARY SUNDAY 16: JULY 12th 2009.

Amos 7:12-15; Mark 6:7-13

Amos 7:10-15

Ah, the arrogance of Amaziah! It is true that he probably held a significant position in the nation of Israel and had the ear of the King. It is also clear that the main problem for Amaziah was that if the Amos continued on with his preaching and teaching, his own position of power and influence would be under threat. Further, if we go back and read what Amos actually said (7:9) we can see that Amaziah was not entirely truthful in his reporting on the sermon of the prophet but he was not going to allow a little problem like the truth to get in the way of his politics.

He demands that the prophet go off into another country, that he exercise his ministry somewhere else so that he would not be a problem to the King and to the prophets who worked in the sanctuary at Bethel. They had a comfortable arrangement going, whereby the King would look after the prophets and the prophets would not say anything that upset the king. Then along comes Amos and he begins to preach a message he says comes from God; he calls on the nation to repent and warns them that if they do not change their ways, the nation will be doomed. No wonder they did not like him!

But Amos has no pretensions and he tells Amaziah that he is just a gardener and someone who looks after sheep. It is God who has called him to carry out a task for which he is ill equipped. The ministry of a prophet. He did not fit into the normal mould and he was not the smooth, well spoken, well dressed prophet the King's court was used to. Nor was he going to preach a message just to keep the King happy. He was going to preach God's message in good times and in bad times, whether the message was accepted or not; whether he was threatened or not. What kept him going was the command: *Go and prophesy to my people Israel!* He did not minister on the basis of his message being warmly welcomed or rejected. He ministered because God had called him to be a prophet and only God would tell him when he could stop being a prophet and could go back to being a shepherd and farmer.

And what a tough message the prophet Amos had to pronounce: *Your wife will become a prostitute in the streets; your sons and daughters will fall by the sword...and Israel will go into captivity far from its own land!* The Assyrians were coming and because the people of Israel had become more concerned with their own comforts and had moved their God to the margins of their lives; because they were more interested in politics and economics than care for the poor and keeping God's law, they would destroy themselves. There was only one thing to do: repent and turn to God and that is the one thing they would not do. They would not repent because they could not see they were in sin.

This is one of the key messages of Amos. The people to whom he was preaching could not understand that they were sinners. They were confident that they were doing God's will, even if it meant they were killing a prophet of God. Their religious lives had reached the point where it was more about fulfilling their own dreams, their own expectations and their own security than about doing what God wanted. Religion had taken over from faith and that was their problem. It also made change very difficult – as Amos discovered.

Amos preaches a message of destruction, of doom for the nation but he also proclaims that it would not be totally destroyed. In the final five verses of his prophecy, he says that somewhere in the future the nation would be rebuilt. That prosperity would once again be theirs. But, because they would not repent, because they continued to ignore the will of God and to go their own way they would have to go through a time of harshness and pain. Not

because God would punish them but because their own sins brought punishment on their own heads.

Mark 6:7-13

It is clear from the teaching of Jesus that he understood discipleship to be something that is carried out within a community. There could never be such a thing as a “lone Christian” someone who lives out his or her Christian life without a connection to other believers. Jesus called people to live in a community of faith. This is what we see here at the opening of today’s reading. Jesus called the Twelve together and then sent them out in pairs.

It is also important to see that what Jesus is doing here, right at the beginning of his ministry, is involving the Twelve in the mission and ministry that had been given to him by his Father. In the words of the Evangelist John: *as the Father sends me, so I am sending you*. The other significant side of this understanding of being called is the important message that the Twelve are sent out “with authority”. They do not go out depending on their own strength and their own power. They go out with the authority of Jesus within them. It is in his name that they carry out their vocations and he is the guarantee that whatever they do will be successful. Even unclean spirits respond to their commands and leave the sick person.

This is how we are to understand the instructions that follow. They are to carry out their ministries depending on no one but Jesus. Ministry is not about the ability of the minister, it is about their faithfulness. By carrying out their ministries in poverty (without worrying about financial rewards or material benefits) they are able to move quickly and without hindrances. This is also why Mark says they are not to take a walking stick with them. Matthew and Luke allow this extra piece of equipment but it is not acceptable to Mark. This would be used to fight off wild animals and snakes but for Mark, the one preaching at the command of Jesus should depend on Jesus keeping them safe as they go about their ministry. As Amos was not to worry about those who wanted to drag him down and destroy him, so the Twelve were to go about their ministry unconcerned about the problems and dangers that might be all around them. It is God who calls and in God will be the victory.

We can see here that the ministry of the Twelve was not just to be a preaching in word alone. Their whole lives were to preach the message of Jesus. When people observed them as they went about their ministries, they were to see in the way they lived the message that they were proclaiming in words. Words alone had no power. They only had power to change the world, to drive out evil when they emerged from a life lived.

It is in verses 12 and 13 that we see what all this means: *So they set off to proclaim repentance; and they cast out many devils and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them*. That is such a powerful statement: as Jesus promised. So it was. He said they had his authority behind them if they carried out their ministry in the manner he wanted, and so it was. Demons were cast out; the sick were cured and people repented and changed their ways of living. Again, not just because of the words the Apostles proclaimed but because those hearing the words also encountered a way of life that spoke of the Kingdom. In the pair of Apostles they encountered Christ.

Conclusion:

Both of our readings today warn us of the difficulties that will come about if we are faithful in our vocations. The faithful disciple will always stand out and will always become an irritation in the eyes of the world. This is because they stand for a message that is counter cultural, that will at times run against what is acceptable in the wider world. Amos upset the religious leaders of his time because he challenged their comfortable lives in a comfortable religion. He preached change and they did not want to change.

The Twelve pick up that same theme. They had a tough task ahead of them and Jesus knows that. This is why he insists that the way forward is not to depend on themselves and their own abilities. They had to move forward trusting in Jesus. If they looked at the enormity of the task they faced they would give up and do nothing for the problems were manifold. If, however, they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus and relied on him to provide them with strength, and understanding and guidance and perseverance, then they would be successful and the sick would be cured and demons flee before them.