Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you want is not a sceptre, but a hoe. The prophet does not rise to reign, but to root out the weeds (St Bernard)'

July 14th **The Shofar** Mark 6:14-26

Prophets call us out

Both the passage from Amos and our reading from Mark put their focus on the fate of prophets who prefer faithfulness to the will of God over accommodating their messages to comfort and pacify their audiences. Not even the King is free from the prophetic judgment of God. They proclaimed what God wanted and feared not the power and anger of those false worshippers, those who claimed to be sons and daughters of Abraham but preferred their own compromised views on religion to obedience to God in the hard things as well as in the good times. Amos is asked to leave the land of Judah; John is beheaded. It is not easy being a prophet of God.

Prophets do not prosper. It is the nature of prophesy to challenge, to shine a light into those parts of faith living that have become stale, dry and far removed from the covenant expectations of God and the teachings and demands of Jesus. They frustrated those to whom they had been sent offering them an opportunity to repent and acknowledge their failings. Their prophetic announcements of judgment were rarely well-received, but they were not seeking popularity or friends. God was first and last and everything in between. And that annoyed the heck out of the religious poseurs.

The mob gang up on the prophets

The priests and associates in the court of their king saw Amos as a real and present danger to their leadership. We can see this anger in the mighty Herod and also the local priest of Bethel, (Amaziah). By vocation, the prophets have little regard for the religious status quo and stood up to the key holders of religious traditions and practices. Longevity in office meant naught to them. Neither did past religious activities.

The passage selected for today from Amos actually begins in the middle of the story. Verses 7-9 present the third of three visions of judgment against Israel. In this vision Amos tells God that he sees a wall built with a plumb line. The plumb line is used to keep the wall vertical and straight during construction. Builders use it in judging how the wall is measuring up by providing a vertical reference point. They had something to guide them, to ensure they were proceeding according to the blueprint.

God used the image of the plumb line to illustrate the failings of the people who claim to be his own people, the men and women of the covenant. God is setting a religious and ethical plumb line amid the kingdom of Israel to see how they stand. What did they find? The people fail to measure up. They are not upright. The plumb line demonstrates their tottering and wavering. They were ancient Israel's equivalent of pew Christians, those who go through the motions of faithfulness but fail when it comes to showing their love for God by loving those who come their way. They seemed content to alienate those God embraced. They sulked when called out and punished the messenger rather than wonder whether they had transformations of life they needed to undertake.

God condemns infidelity

Therefore, God determined he was about to destroy the high places of worship and rise violently against Jeroboam's house. These "high places" gave the people a feeling that all was well in their relationship with God. They could climb to the "high places" do what they needed to do in acts of worship and then come back down to the valley below and forget all about the covenant requirements demanded of them. They were to be doing God's work.

The punishment against the cultic places and the king highlights the elements within Israelite culture that do not measure up. They did not believe they had a God-given plumb line, a code and teachings that were to govern the way they were to be living They were content to make their own rules, to demand that God viewed their lives and their actions in the way they themselves understood their righteousness. Both the prophetic books of Amos and Hosea condemn these high places and what went on there. Being a faithful Hebrew demanded more than just sacrifice and prayer. The fact that they had many unloved poor and suffering brothers and sisters in their communities meant their worship was false.

These high places are the tops of hills that were traditionally places of worship among the Canaanite peoples. When the Hebrew people ended their conquest of the land, they fell into the temptation of worshipping God in these same places, often taking on a hybrid form of celebration, something unacceptable to God.

These three visions by Amos cause quite the response from Amaziah, the priest in Bethel. He sends a message to King Jeroboam that Amos is conspiring against the king (today it would be an email or a letter to the diocesan office), a word in the ear of another person who would gleefully spread the gossip around in attempts to silence the prophet). But Amos does not remain quiet. He goes as far as to prophesy a judgment against the king himself. He is prophesying about the death of Jeroboam and the disastrous fate of Israel.

Amaziah the priest is so threatened by Amos that he demands he leave Judah at once and never prophesy at Bethel again. Amaziah shows us his concerns with absolute clarity. He is made nervous by Amos' judgment against the king and wanted the status quo back. Wanted uncomplicated religion to be reestablished and their delusionary lives of faithfulness restored.

As is so often the way with prophets, there are always people who have something to lose, have something they must put aside if they are to hear the word of the Lord. Prophets are raised up by God and empowered by God with the graces they needed to preach with power and faithfulness. They bore the animosity because even back then, God was their yoke who made their burdens light. In a later nation of Israel, Jesus would make this even clearer by proclaiming that he was their yoke and he would carry the load of discipleship alongside of them. Knowing the fate of a prophet was death, he went so far as to take his own cross, to die in the hope of God defeating death by raising him from the grave.

A final word of warning

We are always the most upset at our prophets when they appear to be questioning our way of life. The prophet asks the indelicate questions, always searches for a depth of faithfulness to God and challenge the way people live out their covenant faithfulness. They say what is awkward, upsetting, and are persecuted because few accept having their spiritual failings placed under the magnifying glass of God's judgment. We do not worry too much about them as long as he agrees with what we are saying and doing.

Not content with prophesies about the demise of the king, Amos delivers yet another prophetic judgment oracle in vv. 16-17, verses that are left out of the lectionary reading for this week. They are some of Amos' most condemning and cruel words in the book.

Israel did not have a right to exist as a nation, as a people. They were called into existence by God to further the divine works of salvation in the world. They were to be God's children doing God's work. It was their only reason for their claim to having a unique place in human history. It was God who mattered. God's will which had priority and they were to be servants and not "masters".

We Christians would be equally foolish to kid ourselves that God in any way guarantees the survival and growth of our faith communities and parishes. We only exist, are only "legitimate" Christians as long as God is both first and last in our lives. We need to listen to the multitude of prophets sent our way, even when we do not always like their messages, do not like the way they deliver it and find them unsavoury, unjust and unfair.