

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B

The era of the prophet Ezekiel was a time when the people of Israel had a place for all the prophets, but the places they had for them were mightily disparate. There were at the time, many a false prophet. The false prophets had a lot of common traits: they prophesied for money, they promised good, and not evil, for who ever had requested their prophecy; and they flattered the king and the people, told them how great and mighty and powerful they were, how, no matter what the evidence might be to the contrary, they would prevail over their enemies. They told them what they wanted to hear instead of what they needed to hear. The true prophets delivered the harsh reality to the populace, and did so with brutal honesty: they called the rulers and the people back to faithfulness to God, and forewarned them that their idolatry and abuse of the poor and the powerless among them was going to lead to their downfall. As a result, the false prophets were given the places of honor, and were held in esteem by those who asked for their flattering prophecies; they were well provided for, and were wholly embraced. The true prophets, on the other hand, were given scorn and rejection: mocked and ridiculed, they would be threatened, driven out of their homelands, and even had their lives imperiled by proclaiming the truth which God was trying to reveal to Israel. Ezekiel was one of the true prophets, and God warned him from the start how well he would be received: not very. The people to whom he was being sent, God warned, would be obstinate of heart. NOT that the true prophets wouldn't be believed, because God revealed to Ezekiel that "they shall know that a prophet has been among them." But they would rebel against God, in whose name Ezekiel spoke. They did not have a place for their God in the lives, and so would they not have room for the prophet calling them back to him.

Like the time of the classic Old Testament prophets, we see in today's Gospel that the issue in Jesus' day was not with the people believing in him. In the passage from Mark, everything the people say is a question, except for two declarative sentences: One: what mighty deeds are wrought by his hands! And then Mark adds: they took offense at him. The problem Jesus encountered in his native place was not that he was not believed because they acknowledged that he does mighty works. The problem he encountered was that he was not accepted, despite the fact that he had demonstrated such great power in so many other places. In this passage from Mark, their objection is that he is too familiar to them: they had known him all his life, they hung around with his cousins, knew his mother, knew him as a carpenter. Who was *he*, this regular, seemingly simple man, to tell them about the kingdom of God? Who was he to challenge them to change their lives and live according to God's plan, newly revealed by Jesus? At other times, people rejected him because what he said to them was too difficult: we can't be expected to turn the other cheek, to forgive our enemies and pray for our persecutors. Can't do it; won't do it.

Others rejected him because of the intensity of his ministry: when he drove the demons out of the man into the swine, the people begged him to leave because of what he had just done; the people were given every reason to believe, but the more reasons they are given, the more they resist Jesus' message. And all of their excuses, really, are false concerns. Jesus is not rejected just because he's too familiar, or because his teachings are too difficult, or because he's too intense. He's rejected because he invites conversion, and expects conversion. He's rejected because he calls us to more than belief; he calls us to faith, to conform our lives in accord with what he reveals.

Like any prophet, Jesus' family and friends from Nazareth had a place for him, societal boundaries that they expected him to observe; Jesus met their rejection because he stepped over the line that they had drawn. His own people told him, essentially, to stop this preaching: he's a carpenter, they reminded themselves, not a prophet. He should get back to business, stop stirring things up. And they reminded him of his lineage, and of his carpentry, because they believed that he was no better than they were. Where did this man, a mere carpenter, a man just like all of them, come off calling *them* back to God? And yet ... he came with such wisdom, and insight, and power. *What mighty deeds are wrought in his name!* Maybe it was envy of the following he was beginning to gather, maybe it was envy of the power he had shown, but for whatever reasons, they would not accept the revelation of Jesus, who was one of their own. He didn't mind his place and live out his life as they expected him to, and so they took offense at him.

Like the people of Nazareth, others throughout history have tried to tell God to mind his place. Many have an idea of where it is that God belongs: he belongs in the churches on Sunday, and people go to have an experience of him and sing songs which praise him, that's his place, in those big special buildings. Or, maybe he belongs in the midst of our prayer groups, or maybe he's supposed to make his presence felt during times of disasters, or of personal need. But how often is God told that he does not belong in this place, or in that arena? We have this misguided notion that our nation's constitution, because it states that our government shall not adopt any one religion or denomination as the official state religion, and shall not promote any religion as such or ban any religion outright, that therefore God does not have a place in our public policy. How often have we heard that abortion and euthanasia are not moral issues but are religious issues and religious issues only, mere matters of belief, when in fact all restrictions come down to what we believe for whatever reason; not believing that murder or robbery or tax evasion are wrong is no defense in the courtroom. Some people say that God doesn't belong in marriage, or in any other of their personal relationships; why should fornication or adultery or whether and when we have children be any business of God's? And some ask what's God doing in my place of work: my

business is making money, making a great big huge profit; so what if it's at somebody else's expense, so what if there's a little bit of lying or cheating involved? He's forgotten his place, which is in that big church on the corner, and only in there; mind your place, Lord. When people say to leave God out of it, whatever "it" is, the reality is that they are taking offense at him. They have drawn a line, and God crossed it. Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he had been given a thorn in the flesh to keep him from becoming too elated. Perhaps that's what happens to man, he becomes too elated in his own grandiosity, because to be honest, God has designed us with a certain grandeur in mind. But in our elation, we fail to see our weakness, and failing to see our weakness, we don't call for God's power. We so often call our weaknesses strengths, just as did the people in the time of Ezekiel, just as did Jesus' neighbors and relatives. By telling the prophets to mind their place, the Israelites secured their place apart from God; by telling Jesus to mind his place, we do the same.

The tag to the story in Mark's Gospel is particularly instructive: "so he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them." Jesus, the all-powerful, could not work a cure. Not because he was not powerful enough, but because those who needed the cure would not accept it. If we can love God only by being free to accept him, then it follows that we must also have the freedom to reject him. Teachers can teach very well, but we won't learn if we won't listen. Doctors may have every capability to cure us, but they won't be able to if we won't take the medicine. And God has every power to save us, and has given us the means to salvation; but salvation can only be realized if we acknowledge that God's place is everywhere and at all times. You know, the government can't save us, our good intentions can't open the gates to heaven, all the knowledge in the world can't atone for our sins. But God has shown that he has the will to save us, if we have the will to be saved. Take no offense at him, at any time for any reason. Rather, let him into our lives; let him permeate every aspect of our lives. Tell him that his place is not only in this church, but in our homes, marriages, in our friendships, in our recreation, in our work. And then keep Jesus in his place—which is every place where we are.

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