

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
Ezek 2:2-5
Ps 12 *passim*
2Cor12:7-10
Mk 6:1-6a

Deacon Bob Cassey
St. Petronille Parish, Glen Ellyn
July 8, 2018

Our readings today, on this 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, call our attention to the call of the prophet and the role of the prophet. But first I'd like to address for a few moments a question that the Gospel may have raised in your mind: what is this reference to the brothers and sisters of Jesus? His brothers are even listed by name! What's that about?

For a long long time, going all the way back to the 4th century, various explanations have been offered. One school of thought, which the Protestant reformers embraced, is that Joseph and Mary had other children after the birth of Jesus; this theory stands against the tradition of the Church that teaches that Mary was a life-long virgin. That theory has always been rejected as a false teaching. Saint Jerome offered another theory, namely, that the Greek words chosen by Saint Mark translate words that originally meant kin-folk, and so the Gospel is really talking about cousins. A third theory has it that the brothers and sisters referred to here are the children of Saint Joseph from a prior marriage. That would explain why the neighbors from Nazareth in today's Gospel call Jesus the son of Mary; that would distinguish him from the children of Joseph's first wife. Also a month ago, we heard from the 3rd chapter of the Gospel of Mark that the brothers and sisters of Jesus wanted to take him away because they were concerned about his mental health; scripture scholars tell us that a younger brother would never have dared to challenge his older brother like that. So, we don't know *precisely* what to make of these references to Jesus's brothers and sisters: they may have been cousins; they may have been step-brothers and -sisters.

* * * * *

Both our first reading, from the Prophet Ezekiel, and our Gospel passage make mention of prophets. At our baptism, we are anointed with Holy Chrism, which is a mixture of olive oil and perfume that the bishop consecrates during Holy Week. The prayer of anointing ends with this: "As Christ was anointed priest, prophet, and king, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life." Jesus is *the* priest, *the* prophet, and *the* king; he holds all three offices. The baptized Christian – you and me – share in the priesthood, the prophethood, and the kingship of Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Anointed One of God.

We'll leave the priesthood and the kingship to another day, because today's readings turn our focus toward the office of prophet.

What is a prophet? In common parlance, we think of a prophet as somebody who can predict the future. That has very little to do with the Bible's idea of a prophet. A prophet is tuned in to what's going on in the world, and into that world that the prophet knows so well he or she speaks the words of God. Let me give you an example from the history of our country.

The early 20th century gave rise of a new science-based movement called eugenics. The proponents of eugenics held that the human race could be improved through scientific advances in breeding. After all, scientific discoveries had produced new and improved strains of horses, cattle, and crops; why, the eugenicists wondered, couldn't the same thing be done with human beings? The Catholic Church taught then, as it does today, that human beings are not livestock. We are created in the image and likeness of God, and the design of babies is best left in the hands of the Creator. So, although the Church opposed eugenics, many leading intellectuals and celebrities thought selective breeding was the way to a brighter future. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in Germany based the exaltation of the Aryan race and the extermination of the Jewish people on principles of eugenics, and consequently worldwide enthusiasm for the eugenics movement started waning in World War II.

But in 1927, the United States Supreme Court jumped on the eugenics bandwagon. The case was called *Buck versus Bell*. A young woman named Carrie Buck had been committed to a state home for the "feeble-minded." The record before the Court showed that Carrie's mother was also feeble-minded and so was her out-of-wedlock daughter. Authorities at the state home ordered that Carrie be sterilized, Carrie objected, and her guardian appealed the decision all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court. The Court ruled, 8 to 1, that nothing in the U. S. Constitution prohibited the state from sterilizing Carrie Buck. In an opinion written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., whom every law student is taught to admire as a giant of American jurisprudence, the Court ruled that "society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind." Justice Holmes concluded the opinion of the Court with a sentence that has become famous among law students: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

Eight justices ruled against Carrie Buck. Only one dissented, and that one justice was a devout Roman Catholic. Every lawyer recognizes the name Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Nobody remembers Justice Pierce Butler anymore. But he stood alone in defending Carrie as a child of God created in God's image and likeness.

It's not easy being a prophet. Prophets are unpopular. Prophets rub people the wrong way. And It's not easy to speak on God's behalf. Satan plants plenty of doubts and raises plenty of objections. Against each doubt and each objection, St. Paul in his second letter

to the Corinthians speaks for God in prescribing the antidote: The Lord says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

We say, "I'm too old." Or, "I'm too young." Or, "I'm too busy." And God says, "My grace is sufficient for you." We say, "I'm no prophet. I'm just an ordinary guy (or gal)." God says, "My grace is sufficient for you." We say, "I'm not smart enough, or well-educated enough, or brave enough, or clever enough." God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." We say, "They're going to trip me up. I don't think quickly enough. I won't know what to say." God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."