

Bishop's Reflection – 15th Sunday (Year B)

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been on a collision course with God since the day on which it separated from the Kingdom of Judah and set up its own temple and its own alternate places of worship. Bethel was one of these alternate places. Steeped in historical tradition, Bethel was the place where God appeared to Jacob in a dream and where Samuel first receives his call.

The prophet Amos was sent by God, from his home in a small village of Judah, to preach to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. As a member of the Southern Kingdom, he is sent to speak against the atrocities of the Northern Kingdom towards the poor. On hearing Amos' condemnation of King Jeroboam, the priest in charge of Bethel tells him to go back to Judah, and stay out of the Northern Kingdom's affairs. You can well imagine that his words were backed up by action should Amos decide to hang around.

Amos responds by telling the priest, "I am no prophet", and I didn't come from a line of prophets. Amos was a day labourer, a tender of sheep and a pruner of fig trees. It was God who had sent him.

It is good for us to remember the same is true for us. So often we may feel that we are under attack or that we are being blamed. It is hard not to take it personally. Amos helps us keep things in perspective. We have been sent in this age and in this time to live the Gospel message. It is not an easy time, nor is the message always well received. We do our best with what we are given, under conditions that are not always in our control, knowing that the true effect comes from God.

Jesus reinforces the missionary's dependence on God by warning us not to carry too much stuff. It is not just that our attraction to stuff has a way of bogging us down, but it has a way of dictating our lives, as we see in our individual and collective histories. Over time, we begin to place more and more value on what we own, and the privileges we enjoy, than on that which we are called to share and the Mission for which we were sent. Not only that, our attraction to stuff prevents others from truly responding to the message by preventing them from sharing what they are asked to give, impeding a mutual sharing between those who are sent and those who are called to receive them.

Finally, as Mary Healy points out in her reflection on this passage, "The Apostles' lack of material possessions lent credibility to their message, since it demonstrated that they were preaching the Gospel out of conviction rather than desire for gain. Peter was later able to say to the cripple at the gate, 'I have neither silver or gold, but what I do have I give you in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean.'" (The Gospel of Mark, pp. 115-116). Relying on the providence of God and the goodness of those to whom they were sent, the Apostles were called to fully live what they profess.

Jesus also instructs his followers not to move from house to house, but to be content with what is made available to them. We, too, may be tempted to upgrade our living conditions at every opportunity we get, but the question of necessity is a good one. We can spend our whole lives moving from one home to another, potentially squandering the time and energy that was intended for ministry.

Far from being addressed solely to Priests, Religious and Missionaries, today's Gospel is addressed to all of us who are called to share in the Mission of Christ. After spending the necessary time that we need with Christ, we, like the Apostles are sent out, mostly two by two, to bring his healing, reconciliation and love to the world. At the end of Mass we hear, "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life."