

**Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C**  
**(Feb. 1, 2004)**

Have you ever wondered what it means to be a prophet? It's a very important part of both Jewish and Christian tradition. We learn something about prophets and prophecy from our three readings today, first from Jeremiah, who was by God's explicit call a prophet, then also from Paul and Jesus who both speak as prophets do.

Jeremiah lets us know that this was not something he assumed on his own. God had called him to this ministry even before he was born, and Jeremiah, like other Old Testament prophets, was reluctant to assume the prophets' mantle. Why? Because he knew it could get him into trouble. But like Isaiah, once Jeremiah heard the call, once God had put God's own words into his mouth, there was nothing he could do but answer the call and speak the word of the Lord. What was the word that he spoke? If I asked you what was the role of the prophets most of you would probably say to predict the future. But while the prophet's ministry does sometimes include foretelling future events, that is not his main job. The word prophet means someone who speaks for or on behalf of someone else. In this case the prophet speaks for God, and what the prophet says on God's behalf is more often than not something the people do not want to hear. And that's what gets them into trouble. The Old Testament prophets were constantly, at God's bequest, reminding the people of the covenant, of their responsibilities to God, to one another, and to the earth, and more often than not it was in terms of reproach. The people were remiss in their duties, in doing what God had asked them to do, and the prophet's task was to urge them to get back on the right track – in today's popular language, to straighten up and fly right.

Jesus experiences some of this in that synagogue in Nazareth. At first as he interprets the word of God for them, they are full of admiration and wonder. But into the joyful reception of Jesus someone inserts a negative voice: "Isn't this Joseph's son? We know him. We know his mother, too. We watched him grow up. Where does he get off talking to us this way? Who does he think he is?" This whole scene is marvelously constructed by Luke. He shows a fairly sophisticated understanding of mob psychology.

With just a little bit of innuendo the people quickly rush to a negative judgment and their praise turns into doubt, then anger, then violence. They drive him to the top of a hill and then they want to kill him. But they cannot. It is not yet time for that. So Jesus walks unharmed through their midst. Luke sets the scene as a prefiguring of what will eventually happen. On another day they will force him up to the top of another hill and there they will kill him. But this time, too, he will walk through their midst by rising from the dead.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul also speaks as a prophet, reminding the people of their responsibilities to one another. Paul had a special concern for this church at Corinth. He had founded it himself. And even when he wasn't there he watched over it with loving care. He heard there were problems in the community. There were factions, there was division, and that is what he is writing about: to remind them that they are the Body of Christ as we heard last week.

He is very strong on this point. A couple of chapters back he admonishes the people for coming together for the breaking of the bread, that is, to celebrate the Eucharist, while they are at enmity with one another. He tells them they cannot share the body of Christ if they are not one in mind and heart. That would be a contradiction. That's pretty powerful. Imagine what it would be like to have Cardinal McCarrick issue a pastoral letter in which he said there would be no more Masses in those parishes where there was any kind of dissension. Consternation. But that is equivalently what Paul is saying. The particular problem that Paul was addressing was the division between the wealthy and the poor – a familiar story all the way through the Bible and one that is still part of the world we live in.

In the famous passage that you heard a few minutes ago, Paul tells his beloved people – beloved in spite of their sinful ways – Paul tells them what is the glue that holds this thing together, the glue that makes it possible to be one body, the glue that allows them to care for one another, the stronger looking out for the weaker, and that glue is love, the love first of all that God has for us and the love that we have for one another. This is not always an easy thing to do. Indeed our own experience teaches us that it can be very difficult. But we must remember that the love, the extraordinary love that

Paul talks about is something we possess, the love of God in us by the simple fact that we possess God's Spirit, so that when we love one another we are loving with the very love of God. To me this is a thrilling idea. And when I find myself becoming impatient or angry or upset, I try, not always successfully, to remind myself of this.

That same love of God continues to raise up prophetic voices in the church today because there are still injustices and abuses that need to be addressed. And the people who are bold enough to call attention to these problems, the present day prophets, still meet disdain, opposition, even death. Think of Archbishop Romero or Martin Luther King, Jr. Think of the discomfort Dorothy Day caused the Cardinal Archbishop of New York when she started working for the poor or the grief she caused the American government when she protested the Vietnam War. A Brazilian cardinal, Dom Helder Camara, once famously said, "When I give bread to the hungry, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are hungry, they call me a communist." Here in Washington we have to ask why there are so many homeless, why is it that people working full time on the minimum wage still do not have enough to support a family, why in the city is education so poor. Why is there still discrimination based on race or ethnic background or gender or sexual orientation? People don't like to hear these questions raised because they make us uncomfortable. The people in that Nazareth synagogue were also made uncomfortable by the challenges Jesus gave them, but they are the prophetic questions and if we are to respond to the love that God in Jesus Christ has asked us to show for all people, they must be raised, and beyond that, action must be taken. It's what the love of God urges us to do.