

**Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
(Jan 29, 2006)**

Speaking for the Lord

Prophets! Our readings today are about prophets, not profits as on Wall Street or in profits and loss. Our world seems much more interested in profits, p-r-o-f-i-t-s, than in the other kind of prophets, the ones we read in the Old Testament, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the others. Perhaps that's because our world has not listened too closely to the voices of the other kinds of prophets.

When people hear the word prophet today they usually think of predicting the future. And while that is sometimes part of the Old Testament prophets' work, it isn't the most important thing they do. The prophet is the spokesperson for God. The prophet speaks in the name of God, and he is usually much more concerned about the present than the future. The prophet's most important task is to remind the people of their responsibilities to God. God had established a covenant with the people. He had told them, "You will be my people and I will be your God – and I will be faithful to you. No matter what! And in return I want you to be faithful to me. And you will show your fidelity to me by being faithful to one another." Then God spelled out how they were to be faithful to one another by giving them the commandments that described their responsibilities to God and to one another.

But unfortunately the people were not always faithful to God or to one another. And that's when the prophets came on the scene. They did not hesitate to confront even kings when they were going wrong. And of course for that reason they got into trouble. They said things that were not popular. People generally did not want to hear their message. So those who were called to be prophets were often reluctant to accept that office. Jeremiah is a classic example. He knew how prophets were treated – very poorly, persecuted, even put to death – and he wanted no part of it. He was a mere youth when God called him, and he said to God, "I can't do it, I'm too young." God said, "Don't worry. I'll take care of you." He had a speech impediment. He said, "I can't talk." God said, "Don't worry. I'll put my

words in your mouth.” And once the word of God had been given him, he could not keep silent, with the expected result that he was persecuted.

The prophets not only criticized secular leaders, kings and princes, and their subjects when they drifted away from God and the things of God. They did not hesitate to let the religious leaders know when they were going astray. For this reason they sometimes operated outside the parameters of organized religion. Jesus is the prime example of a prophet who criticized the religious leaders, and for that reason he became a threat to them, especially when they saw the people following him, and ultimately they condemned him to death.

In our Gospel passage today we hear of Jesus doing what the prophets do and doing especially what he came to do: confronting the forces of evil. This is the way Mark presents Jesus in his Gospel. His first task is to face the evil in our world, as represented here by the man with an unclean spirit, and overcome that evil.

It’s interesting that in Mark’s Gospel Jesus doesn’t deliver any long discourses as he does in the other Gospels. Mark seems less interested in what he said than in what he did. All four evangelists tell us that Jesus taught by word and example. Mark emphasizes the example. Indeed in this scene in the Capernaum synagogue his very presence seems to be a prophetic statement that causes a violent reaction on the part of the man with an unclean spirit. But Jesus simply says, very calmly, very quietly, “Come out of the man.” And immediately the man was liberated. It’s a prophetic gesture on Jesus’ part, showing us what he had come to do.

Well the forces of evil have not been entirely conquered. They are still around, and we have been asked to join the struggle to rid the world of what stands between it and God. And we have our prophets still with us today and still saying and doing things that disturb us: people like Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa and Fr. Horace McKenna, reminding us of our responsibility to care for the poor, people like Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Berrigans, telling us that even our own government can act unjustly, people like Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen insisting on the need for prayer and a healthy spiritual life. And perhaps that’s a neat way of looking at prophetic activity: prayer, politics, and poverty. You sometimes hear people saying that our nation’s separation of church and state demands that

we keep politics and religion separate. But that's impossible. There is virtually no political issue which is not also a moral issue and therefore also a religious issue. And the Gospels tell us very clearly that Jesus' religious activity got him into trouble politically.

Religious leaders, including the Catholic bishops of the world, often speak about political issues. The American Catholic bishops have issued strong statements about abortion, war, the economy, poverty, homelessness, hunger, capital punishment – all political and social issues but at the same time, all moral and religious issues.

Not everyone, even people who consider themselves good Catholics, agree about what the bishops say. The majority of Catholics support them on abortion but disagree about capital punishment. Both the American bishops and the pope condemned the war in Iraq, and I'm sure many Catholics disagreed with that, and this, I feel, should give us all food for thought. How do we, members of this parish, trying sincerely to do what God wants, react?

First of all, our prophetic call – and we have one whether we want it or not – like Jeremiah we may want to run away, but the Lord insists that we respond – our prophetic call requires that we be informed. What are the prophetic voices saying? We can't really object or disagree if we don't understand either what they are saying or why they are saying it. Then of course our own motivation is highly important. What prompts us to agree or disagree? Here's where prayer and reflection are crucial. After that, our informed conscience should tell us what to do. We all have to do that for ourselves, but it helps to do it in the context of a community, with other people who are struggling with the same decisions.

Here perhaps we can learn an important lesson from Mark's Gospel – and the others as well. The evangelists tell us that Jesus accomplished his work of fighting the evil in our world by going about doing good. It seems to me the best way to respond to our prophetic call is to do the same thing. Not to do exactly the same things that Jesus did. That's impossible. But to learn to do whatever we do with the love of Jesus. To do so much good that there is no more room for evil. To crowd it out and to fill the world around us with both deliberate and random acts of kindness. After all Jesus told us the two greatest commandments were about love and that was the big

example he gave us, his own love and the love of the Father: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that the world might be saved through him, and that there's no greater love than this: to give one's life for one's friends. Our prophetic task is to show that same love so that we might join our own efforts to the work of Jesus, the work of saving the world.

Coincidentally our Holy Father, Pope Benedict, exercised his prophetic office when he published his first encyclical letter this past week and it's all about love. The pope recalls us to some very basic, fundamental notions of our Christian faith and urges us to follow the very commands that Jesus says are the most important. Can there be a better way for all of us to accept our responsibilities as prophets than doing what Jesus has asked us to do as the pope reminds us all?

It's perhaps another coincidence that this week we celebrate Catholic Schools Week. Our Catholic schools also exercise a prophetic role as they teach young people what it means to be both good people and good citizens with a special emphasis on spiritual values that they would not receive in purely secular schools. We here at Holy Trinity have reason to be especially proud of our school. It was the first elementary school established in the District of Columbia and enjoys the reputation today of being the best in Washington. We pray today that our school, like ourselves, may continue the prophetic work it has been called to do.