

Monday of the 18th Week of the Year, II, August 4, 2014 (#407)

As we all know, God sent prophets to Israel to speak his word to them, mainly to get the people to repent from their sins. However, at times the Lord wanted to shout the message a little louder than usual, so that the Israelites would definitely take notice. At times like this, he would call his messengers to use prophetic actions, so that the message became, as it were, incarnate and visible. Thus, the Lord had told Hosea to marry a harlot wife, one who would cheat on him, as a way of symbolizing how Israel had adulterated her marriage with the Lord through the worship of false gods. So too Isaiah is told to name his son, not Simon, or Joseph, but Shear-Jashub, which literally means, in Hebrew, "A remnant will return." Later, when he meets the king, Ahaz, when the city of Jerusalem is being besieged, he takes his young boy along with him, as a way of emphasizing that, if the king remains loyal to the Lord, the city will be saved, which at that time it was. Later, when Jerusalem is about to be destroyed, the Lord tells Ezekiel, living already in exile in Babylon, that when his wife dies, he is not to mourn publicly for her, such as covering his beard and eating the customary bread, to indicate to his countrymen that the Temple will soon be destroyed, causing them to groan inwardly in realization that that disaster is a result of their own sins.

We see yet another example of a prophetic action in our first reading today, from Jeremiah. In the preceding chapter, we learn that the Lord instructed the prophet to make a yoke of wood and wear it on his shoulders, as animals might bear, as a way of conveying the idea that they needed to submit to the yoke of Babylon voluntarily, surrendering the city to their besiegers to prevent its total destruction. That fact serves as background for today's reading, when a false prophet named Hananiah removes that yoke from Jeremiah's neck and breaks it in the sight of the people, insisting that within two years all the treasures that Babylon took from the Temple several years before would be returned. Jeremiah leaves, and, unlike Hananiah, waits upon the word of the Lord, and then returns with the message that, since Israel has eschewed a wooden yoke, the Lord will construct for them an iron yoke, indicating how harsh they will be treated by Babylon for rebelling against them. Then, to drive home the truth of his words, he performs another symbolic action, predicting that Hananiah will die that very year, which in fact happens, this showing the level of veracity of Hananiah's lying words. Thus are we presented with two men, as true prophets, who delivered God's word, a word that was vindicated when Jerusalem fell to Babylon; and a false prophet, who played to the crowd for immediate popularity, but with disastrous personal result.

Jeremiah is one of the great heroes of the Old Testament. True, he complained to the Lord about the way that the people treated him, and how even the Lord's consolations would at times dry up. Still, he never ceased preaching the message of God to Israel, even when threatened with persecution and death. For this reason, when Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is, they respond that some think he is Jeremiah come back from the dead. Well, we encounter two more major heroes from the Hebrew Scriptures later this week, as we celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration: Moses and Elijah, who appear in glory with Jesus. Moses, of course, had carried the people through the desert for 40 years, listening to the complaints of his fellows that whole time, who threatened to have him deposed, and even stoned. Elijah faithfully preached against the idolatry of Queen Jezebel, which action placed a price on his head. They are appropriate

companions for Jesus today, the quintessential prophet, who gives his life for his own message of salvation, and thereby brings that salvation about through his sacrificial death. Indeed, Peter, James and John would learn from this scene from these heroes, and so become heroes themselves, risking their own lives after Pentecost in the spreading of the gospel.

It is true that they needed that message driven home that day. You see, as Saint Mark records, Jesus had just made his first prediction of his passion, and Peter had rebuked him, resulting in his being called Satan by Jesus. Well, today, when Jesus appears in glory, we hear the voice of the Father saying not only that Jesus is his beloved Son, but that they need to listen to him, driving home the message of the passion leading to glory. Then, once they returned to the bottom of the mountain, they encounter a demoniac boy whom the other disciples could not exorcise. Jesus expels the demon, thereby demonstrating by his own symbolic prophetic action that his sacrificial death will lead to liberation from the power of the Kingdom of Darkness. This dramatic message, then, is the ultimate word from the Father: that in Christ Jesus we have been freed from sin and death, as symbolized by Babylon, and will one day enter paradise, as shown by the return of the exiles to the Promised Land, if we, like them, recommit ourselves to the Law of Christ, as lauded by our responsory, Psalm 119, which praises in turn God's law, ordinances, decrees and statutes.

In our gospel passage, from Saint Matthew, we see yet another prophetic action, the multiplication of the loaves. In the parallel passage in John, this bread is shown to represent, not simply the Eucharist, which is clear in all four accounts, but the Word of God as well. Thus, in hearing this story today, we are reminded of just how generous God is now with his Word, sending it not simply to a few chosen prophets, but to all the baptized, who are called to be prophets of the Kingdom. The very amount of bread produced shows the superabundance of the gift, which is meant to nourish our minds as the Eucharist nourishes our souls, so that we have both the wisdom and the strength to spread the gospel message, after the manner of the apostles. In receiving this bread, we prove to be disciples, receiving from Jesus what we need to be apostles, those who go forth and preach the message through word and action, themselves becoming sacrificial bread when necessary for the conversion of others. It is essential that we be like Jeremiah rather than Hananiah and speak the true message of the Lord, even if it is unpopular. May we, then, be willing, to follow Jeremiah's example, not only through the occasional explicit word, but especially through the consistent prophetic action of incarnating the Law of Christ in our lives, so that, by our own willingness to sacrifice our own convenience for the spread of the good news, God might shout to the world through us his message of salvation, so that perhaps we too will one day be numbered among the heroes of the faith.