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Spiritual Leaders in Troubled Times

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Spiritual Leaders in Troubled Times

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Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for July 8, 2012 for Cycle B:

Ez 2:2-5; Ps 123; 2 Cor 12:7-10; Mk 6:1-6

SPIRITUAL LEADERS IN TROUBLED TIMES

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The prophets of Israel were told frequently by God that their task of admonishing the people would be an onerous mission. They were to take up the challenge, not because success could be measured in human terms, but rather because it was divinely imposed responsibility. People in our society tend to set goals to be achieved in a certain period of time, and the evaluation of performance in many jobs comes with discouraging regularity. How would the prophets of Israel have fared as teachers today? Besides the lack of popularity with their audience that they were warned about, most of them would be judged "unsatisfactory" by their superiors!

In 597 BCE King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon visited Jerusalem to demand tribute and to replace King Jehoiachin of Judah with a puppet of his own choosing. Ezekiel, a young priest of the Temple built by Solomon, was among those taken into exile with the royal family. Several years later, Ezekiel was called to become a prophet, after he experienced a marvelous sign of God's presence with the exiled Jews. Ezekiel may have been worried about the fate of Jerusalem and its Temple. He had a vision of a heavenly chariot bearing the ark of the heavenly Temple and accompanied by four living creatures. The King of Babylon might threaten the earthly Temple but its heavenly prototype (see Ex 25:40; 26:30) was safe from any human or demonic depredation.

Among those in exile were people who hoped for an early demise of the persecutor and a swift return to their homeland. They would not be receptive to God's message through Ezekiel. The mission would be an affront to their hopes for an easy resolution of their dilemma. "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels, who have rebelled against me" (Ez 2:3). Long before, Elijah had been assured that there would always be a remnant faithful to the covenant with God (see 1 Kg 19:18), yet in many generations the royal family, nobility and priests set a bad example and misled the ordinary people. These leaders had not listened to Jeremiah's message of patience under the threats of Nebuchadnezzar and their obstinacy would also mean that they turn a deaf ear to Ezekiel's ministry. However, by hindsight they will know that there has been a prophet among them.

By the time of Jesus, the Jewish people had long since sensed that prophecy had been replaced by other forms of spiritual leadership. But it seems that a proverb echoed the experience of earlier centuries: "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house" (Mark 6:4). The folks in Nazareth looked on Jesus as a home-town boy, so they did not take him seriously in his new role as teacher and wonderworker. As the Irish say: "I knew him when he was a nothing!" Their lack of openness inhibited Jesus from helping them.

The Church today continues to exercise the prophetic role that Jesus fulfilled as the new Moses (see Dt 18:15 and 18 in Jn 6:14; Mt 21:11). The teaching authority of the Pope and the college of bishops continues the admonitory instructions of Jesus, who spoke with authority (see Mk 1:27; Mt 16:17-19; 18:17-18). Over the centuries, many have rejected this authority, perhaps because of their own stubbornness, perhaps because some of these teachers at times failed to set good example. In any case, in our time the need for a unified voice presenting the doctrines of faith and morality is urgent, because discordant theories of those opposing the Gospel become increasingly aggressive.

In the liturgical proclamation of these texts on Sunday a challenge is laid upon us to examine our conscience. How do we react to the voice of Christ's appointed authorities in the Church? Are our local communities blithely ignoring aspects of the Gospel and the application of its principles to our time by the Pope and bishops? Although we are assured that the Spirit always guides the Church, each leader must serve in awe of the magnitude of his responsibility. Continuing the task of Christ the prophet is probably easier than Ezekiel's work, but in some ways it may be more challenging. So the Church urges us to pray daily for all in authority as Christian leaders, whether in the hierarchy, the parish, the classroom or home. May we all apply the divine words heard by St. Paul to our own situation: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).