

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C, January 31, 2016

Luke 4: 21-30

“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” If only they had been the final words, on that day. But instead people questioned, if it were really Joseph’s son speaking to them. Their doubt demands clarification and breaks Jesus’ silence.

Just after the Second Vatican council wrapped up, in the 1960s, Simon and Garfunkel released a smash hit, entitled the Sound of Silence. From its verses, “The people bowed and prayed, to the neon god they made, and the sign flashed its warning. In the words that it was forming, and the sign said, the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls.” Not the most attractive places, but a real interesting lyric!

In these days of troubling economic times, what indeed has become of our prophets? Not the profits of balance sheets and ledgers, or the kind, with which corporations and accountants work. And certainly not the business of psychics and fortune tellers but rather, the appointed office, dedicated to sharing God’s Word. We still have subway walls, but entrusted to our care, are an entire section of Holy Scripture dedicated to four/six Major and twelve Minor Prophets.

Isaiah, Jerimiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, are like envelopes bearing four canonical Gospels. These prophetic manuscripts together with oral tradition are the product of God's communication ministry. That is the institution, into which God calls and appoints successive individuals to receive and transmit, eternal life giving messages. The prophets are in essence God's spokespeople. The communications they receive comes in the form of visions, dreams, and ecstasies, and are to be forwarded via speech, writings, and deeds.

The office of prophet wasn't necessarily permanent, or hereditary, but instead was a direct and dependent, call to proclaim a timely message. Prophets of scripture denounced idolatry, defended moral law, offered counsel in political and private matters, expressed judgement, yes judgement of people's conduct, taught sublime truths, and suggested lofty morals. Their words contained threats, announcements, and promises, and were always focused, with great anticipation on the Messiah. That is, God's ultimate Word made flesh. Know anybody doing that today? We learn even the unborn, may be appointed prophets, as was so with Jeremiah. We also uncover, fulfilling this scripture will necessarily deliver us, into the middle, of even public controversy. Foreign policy, medical ethics, and education, just a few of the arenas!

It seems people and some governments prefer silent prophets, and by silent I mean dead. Those ones don't cause us any trouble. They've said all they're going to say? But friends no amount of lapsed time will ever bring silence, because God's faithfulness is ageless. The real enemy is a complacent mind and a hardened heart. God's prophets continue to disturb our conscience and stir our souls and still so many of us prefer to leave their words alone.

In today's Gospel, we discover Jesus, on a little homecoming trip. He's returned to Nazareth, from the shores of Galilee. People here know his parents, grandparents, cousins, uncles, and aunts. But this complacent Nazarene crowd is about to be shaken to its very core. Maybe they don't know their native son now, quite as well, as they first thought. Jesus isn't doing as much carpentry any longer. People see, He has changed focus! He is now on a path fully engaged in bringing God's salvation plan forward.

While reading from the well-known book of Isaiah, Jesus tells the assembly, the moment of truth and fulfillment has arrived and is standing before their very eyes. "We didn't see that coming" many would have thought. We just came to church like we always do. What's really going on here?

Could it be we don't Jesus as well as we think either? We may know of him, like we know the name of another, but that's never the same as knowing a person, with whom, we are in love.

By referencing two of Israel's great prophets, Jesus serves notice, he too is intimately connected with God's prophetic office. Is in fact its author and its exemplar par excellence! Remember Elijah, sent to do battle with the false prophets of Baal. Elijah didn't really enjoy much success either, in a world that had forsaken the covenant, torn up the altars, and were repeatedly putting God's holy prophets to the sword. Still in the end, it is Elijah, who is taken up to heaven. Elisha his successor was also known to have worked great miracles, notably the cleansing of Naaman's leprosy! In sharing these stories Our Lord is communicating common knowledge. Still anyone seated in a synagogue, in Nazareth, on the Sabbath would have easily seen, Jesus installing himself into Israel's historic and illustrious prophetic fold, and it's enough to ignite the crowd's fury! How a normally good natured and law abiding group, suddenly become so indignant by a replay of their own story. Why are these memories and flashbacks just a little too loud to ignore this time? Are there skeletons of infidelity, people would prefer, be left in closets? It's probably even harder to accept, one of their very own is calling them out. But who else could? And that's what prophets do.

What disturbs is that Jesus is basically telling them point blank, not a lot has really changed from the time of the early prophets. This Nazarene crowd turns, in a very short time, from Welcome Home hugs and kisses, into a raging mob. Jesus gives them the slip, but it won't be quite so easy on the Mount of Olives when another kiss, comes our Lord's way. We have to wonder folks if today, we're listening to the Gospel and following the Church's teaching any better than a Nazarene crowd.

I even wonder if today it isn't we, who more often try to give Jesus the slip! Silencing God's voice with our noise, clutter, and indifference! Besides, if we need a prophet or prophetess we'll find a quiet one on Google who says exactly what we want to hear.

In an age of mass communication, who speaks on today's issues of faith and human development? I know a trip across the channel guide on a Sunday morning might suggest too many? Brothers and sisters test everything you are told against what the Gospels say and the Church teaches. If the poet is a people's voice, prophets carry God's melody into the depths of our very soul!

In Baptism, Christians have been enrolled and anointed to serve as God's prophetic voice. Filled with power of the Holy Spirit, to stand boldly before the world saying, "this scripture is being fulfilled, as we speak." We are to be a people well informed, careful listeners and always ready to speak out on matters of justice and truth!

Speaking when we do with conviction and acting with mercy, in ways that show the world, God's voice cannot be driven over the edge, and without any doubt is alive and well!

Amen

