

SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2016: TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 8:47 I Timothy 2:1-8 Luke 16:1-13

Contrary to popular Christian belief, the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures weren't sent by Yahweh to predict the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. The late Raymond Brown always reminded his students and readers, "There are no Old Testament predictions of Jesus as we know Jesus." Through the centuries we've given prophetic statements meanings which the original prophets never intended to convey. If prophets simply predicted an event which would only take place hundreds of years down the road, why did so many of them die with their sandals on?

It's essential to see prophets as part of their day and age, not our day and age. They're the conscience of the people, reminding them of how God wants them to live their lives, constantly pointing out how they're living counter to God's plan. No one does this better than the first of the "book prophets:" Amos.

Active in 8th century BCE Israel, Amos does what all prophets do: he goes to the "good folk," showing how they're practicing a faith which isn't Yahweh's faith. It's historically easy to practice a religion which at times actually leads people away from God's plan. If the prophet's audiences aren't at least outwardly committed to carrying out God's will the prophet doesn't have much of an argument when he or she proclaims God's message.

That's why Amos delivers the oracles in today's first reading at the national shrine of Bethel: one of Israel's most sacred sanctuaries. He's addressing people who think they're good Jews, individuals who among other things keep the religious regulations surrounding the new moon and the Sabbath. If they didn't they wouldn't be at Bethel. But he points out that once these holy times are over those who so faithfully frequent the national shrine "trample on the needy and destroy the poor of the land." They use false weights when they sell their grain, and are willing to accept bribes ("a pair of sandals") in their dealings with the poor and lowly. They go so far as to even sell "the refuse of the wheat" to those whose severe hunger forces them to buy it.

It's no accident that the Pauline disciple responsible for I Timothy longs for followers of Jesus "to lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity." We share his wish that people "should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument." All of us hope to live a peaceful existence. Yet the gospel Jesus teaches that because of the prophetic aspect of being other Christs, that isn't always possible.

In today's gospel pericope, Luke's Jesus reminds us that carrying on his ministry doesn't happen by accident. It usually takes a lot of planning. He conveys that reality by pointing out the obvious: people work at doing evil much harder than they work at doing good. The unjust steward is ingenious in making certain his master's debtors "will welcome (him) into their homes" after he's been fired. Jesus demands his followers deliberately spend their lives giving themselves over to God, not to evil.

I've frequently suggested that we stop examining our conscience before we go to sleep at night, and begin to examine it when we get up in the morning. With the day in front of us, we can more easily figure out at what point we can squeeze in a good action for a friend, do an unrequested favor for someone, or simply be a loving person in a particular situation. It makes more sense to plot and connive good than just to instinctively do good when it comes to mind. Such precise planning could really make us prophetic Christians "dangerous" people in the world.

COPYRIGHT 2016 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN

SEPTEMBER 25, 2016: TWENTY- SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 I Timothy 6:11-16 Luke 16:19-31

Many of us, as children in a fit of anger, once turned to our parents and yelled, “I hate you!” I trust none of us have lost any sleep over such an encounter. We all realize it’s one thing to say those words at the age of three, and another thing to say them at the age of thirty. The words are the same, but there are implications to saying them as a child that we simply don’t understand until we get older. That’s why most parents also don’t lose any sleep over their child’s angry outburst.

Yet some implications of our actions and words are harder to appreciate than others. The gospel Jesus is notoriously concerned with pointing out some specific implications that some of us never seem to notice no matter how old we are.

He follows in the footsteps of the classic Hebrew prophets, like Amos, the first of the “book prophets.” (Prophets like Elijah and Elisha preceded Amos by a century. But there’s no “book” of Elijah or Elisha.) Active in Israel during the 8th century BCE, Amos points out that even the “good folk” who frequent the national shrine at Bethel don’t give a darn about the collapse of the country around them. Though they’d never admit it, their actions are a sign of their lack of empathy for all but themselves. Complacent in their plush lifestyle, they don’t even notice the disconnect between themselves and the vast number of poor living around them.

Among other things, Amos accuses them of practicing something many of us take for granted today: “eating calves from the stall.” These animals aren’t fattened by grazing in the field, but are fed grain the poor could eat, just so their meat would eventually be a better grade than that produced by grass-fed animals.

We could not have a better gospel pericope today. It dovetails perfectly with our Amos passage. Just as the faithful at Bethel don’t notice the implications of their lifestyle, so Luke’s rich man never seems to notice Lazarus “lying at his door.” He’s consumed with the quality of his clothes and the items on his banquet menus. Stray dogs pay more attention to Lazarus than the wealthy owner of the house.

Jesus, as a Pharisee who believes in an eternal life after this life, warns their roles will be reversed after death, when it’s too late to do anything to effect the after-life. According to his theology, such a belief can be based not just on his resurrection from the dead, but on a proper reading of the Hebrew Scriptures (Moses and the prophets). He’s convinced the way we live our lives right here and now has eternal implications.

No wonder the unknown author of I Timothy encourages us to “compete well for the faith.” Just as, on a natural level, we continue, with age, to better understand the effects of our words and actions, so our faith takes us beyond the present state of our knowledge and experiences, to surface the deeper implications of what we say and do; to find meaning in people, things, and situations which many around us never seem to notice. Faith really is a life-long “competition” with ourselves. We’re expected to see those people, things and situations with different eyes today than the eyes with which we saw them yesterday.

One of the greatest obstacles to our becoming other Christs is our complacency with the way things are, especially when others are being hurt by the way things are. I worry the risen Jesus might not give me a bye at the pearly gates just because “I didn’t notice.”

COPYRIGHT 2016 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN